

### “Do the Will of Our Father”

Actions speak louder than words. I know I heard that said as I was growing up, and perhaps you did, too. Perhaps you’ve said it yourself. In many ways it is true. A politician may say all sorts of things, but it’s what he or she does while in office that really tells us about their true priorities. The Bible tells us about another example of this as well. If you are in a position to help someone in need, and you don’t, but you tell them that you wish them well, your actions speak louder than your words. If you really did wish them well, you would do something about it while you can. It is easy for words to fall out of our mouths, whether good or bad. We say things like, “I’ll pray for you” or “I love you,” but unless we follow those words with actions, they don’t really ring true. Actions speak louder than words.

In Jesus’ brief parable that is before us for our consideration, he describes another example of a time when actions speak louder than words. It is fine and good to say that you are going to do something, but that only really matters if you do indeed do what you say. As we consider this parable more closely in our sermon, we will notice that Jesus does indeed want for us to do the will of our father.

The parable before us is one of a series of parables from this part of Matthew’s Gospel. It is very interesting to note what comes right before Jesus tells this story, though. Jesus was teaching in the Temple when the chief priests and the elders came to him. They asked him about what he was doing and who had given him the authority. In reply, Jesus asked them a question. He asked whether the baptisms that John the Baptist had been performing were from heaven—from God—or from people. The chief priests and elders thought about it and realized that Jesus had trapped them. They couldn’t say that John’s baptism was from heaven, because then Jesus would ask them why they didn’t follow him and believe what John said. But they didn’t feel that they could answer that it was from people either, because they worried that would be an unpopular answer.

So, they answered, “We don’t know.” and Jesus responded that he wouldn’t reveal his authority either. But then he went on with the words of our sermon text. It seems to me that he said, “If you can’t answer that, I am going to give you a question that you can answer.” Told a story about two sons directed by their father to work in his vineyard. One said, “No,” but went and worked later on anyway. The other said, “OK,” but never went out into the vineyard to work. So, the question was: “Which one did what his father wanted him to do?” And the priests and elders knew the answer. It was an easy answer. Actions speak louder than words. The one who actually did what his father asked, even if it was after initially refusing, was the one in the right.

But even though these men had the right answer about Jesus’ hypothetical situation, they didn’t realize that Jesus was really speaking about them. They didn’t realize that Jesus had trapped them just as much as he had with his question about John’s baptism. Jesus took another route to get to the point of rebuking them for their refusal to listen to John and to follow through on what he said. And the lesson that Jesus taught them is one that we should take to heart as well.

So let’s look a little bit closer at each of these sons. Let’s actually start with the second son, the “bad” one if you will. Dad asks him to go out and work in the vineyard, and he says, “Yes, sir, I will.” So far, so good. But then he never follows through. There was nothing more to his words than just words. He never actually accomplished any work in the vineyard.

Jesus in explanation reveals that this son represents the chief priests and the elders. They were the ones who said all the right things. They were the ones who had risen to power in the ruling structure of the Jewish society of Jesus’ day. They were off to a good start, with many advantages, not the least of which was a familiarity with the Scriptures. But when God’s prophet John the Baptist told them to repent, when he showed them what that meant, they simply didn’t listen and follow through. They never believed him. They never set about actually doing the work that God had laid before them to do, the works of true repentance and service. The good about them was only shallow and surface and initial, there was nothing deeper to their lives.

The clear implication for us is that we should not be like they were. We shouldn't respond to God with a, "Yes, I will do what you say," but then continue on without our lives being impacted by true repentance. But isn't that the natural way that we behave? When we are confronted with sin, we acknowledge that we probably shouldn't do that...and then go on doing it. We so often want to be seen as the people who go to church and the people who are religious, but we don't always concern ourselves with the deeper matters of what that really looks like in our hearts and in our lives.

The context of this parable itself tells us more about these men. They were worried about their own popularity. They were concerned about appearances. They were self-centered. They were "yes-men" by their words, but because they were so inwardly focused, they never took to heart the deeper messages of God's Word. They never acknowledged their pervasive sinfulness. They never repented. They never trusted in a Savior, and probably never felt that they needed one. But they did.

And so do we. As much as we don't want to admit it, as much as we would prefer not to think about it at times, as much as we remain sinfully self-absorbed, we too will miss out on God's call to repentance, to change our hearts and our minds and as a result to change our actions.

That's where the other son comes in. He doesn't start out so well. Dad asks for his help in the vineyard, and he refuses. But later on, he changes his mind, and he goes out to work. There are a lot of details to the story that we might like to know or at best can only infer, like why he had this change of mind or change of heart. It fits with the story to think that he realized that his father had made a reasonable request and that his reaction was not what it should have been. In other words, the very actions of this child were actions of repentance.

Repentance is a changing of mind, a changing of heart, a changing of attitude. We are all born into the world with sinful and selfish attitudes, but the Holy Spirit through God's Word calls us to turn away from our sins and to turn to God for forgiveness. Our readings have reminded us today that when true repentance happens, it changes our actions as well. And so this son, the first son in Jesus' story, is our example of repentance. He at first refused the work set before him, but when he repented and changed his mind, then his actions also changed. He went and worked in the vineyard, just as he had been asked.

Jesus says that this son is like the notorious sinners of that time who responded to John the Baptist's preaching. He rebuked the chief priests and elders saying, **"the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did."** These were sinners who, when called to repent, saw their sin for exactly what it was. They saw their deep need for help. They saw their absolute inability to find their own way out of their sin. They turned to Jesus. That's what John's preaching always led to. They repented. They brought forth fruits in keeping with repentance. They turned aside from their wicked ways of life and with God's help lived lives of service. They were completely changed.

That's what Jesus was tenderly inviting the chief priests and the elders to do as well. That's what he constantly is calling us to do. Repent. Recognize your own sinfulness and deep need for help and rescue. Find it in Jesus, in his cross and in his empty tomb. And let that innocent death on your behalf and that resurrection to life move you to go to work. Set your sins aside. Think of the temptations that hold you most strongly and pray about them. Look for encouragement in the places that God promises to give it, in his Word, in his sacrament. And with that encouragement, put those sins aside. Live the life that proclaims who you really are: God's own baptized child.

Actions do speak louder than words. Repentance is more than just words. But let's imagine just one more son in Jesus' parable. This is who we want to be for the rest of our lives: the son who hears his father's call, who answers, "I will go as you have said," and then does. May God bless us with true repentance. May he lead us to do his will.

The Text: Matthew 21:28–32 (NIV)

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

<sup>29</sup> “ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.