

“Saying ‘Yes’ And Really Meaning It”

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Matthew 21:28-32 = parable of the two sons

The parable of the two sons. When the father came and asked them both to work in the vineyard, the first said “No” but relented and went. The second said “Yes” but did nothing. Jesus asks:

“Which of the two did the will of the Father?”

A simple question with a simple answer. Yet as we know, nothing in Jesus’ parables is ever quite that straightforward.



Jesus is locked in a battle of wits with the temple authorities, the priests and leaders of Israel, a struggle over the essence of faith. Is belief merely verbal assent to doctrines, or actual changed lives? Jesus is calling these leaders to account for saying “yes” but doing “no” when it comes to the call of God.

Jesus contrasts these leaders with those who respond initially “no” but then say “yes” to God’s call:

“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you....For you did not change your minds and believe John....but the tax collectors and the prostitutes [did].”



Now that’s just crazy talk. Jesus has our attention now. Jesus uses the phrase *“change of mind”* twice in this short parable. What separates the two sons? One changed his mind, repented of a bad choice. The other didn’t. Sincere repentance is once again key.

I wonder how many in our congregation would be comfortable if we did have, you know, “real sinners” as members. What if notorious sinners now repentant and reformed, say a former porn star or a swindler or a drug dealer or a murderer, what if they wanted to become part of our fellowship?



I wonder how many members would honestly be contented having these individuals share openly the dramatic transformations God has effected in their lives. Would we believe them? More importantly would we trust them, or would cynicism get the best of us? I am uncertain how many would actually accept them, knowing their sinful pasts. We might formally accept them into fellowship, but wouldn't we keep a suspicious, watchful eye.

How about a member like Watergate co-conspirator Chuck Colson? His rediscovery of his faith in prison led him to build an effective prison ministry. Or Jeb Stuart Magruder, another co-conspirator, his recovery of his Christian faith led him to ordained service. Do we accept such conversions so easily because they are white-collar criminals, or is it on account of celebrity status?



Generally, we would prefer not to know about an inglorious past. There is a large and prestigious congregation in Dallas. It grew from inception to mega-church by ministering to persons with alcoholism. Its growth was correlated with a substantial commitment by its founding leaders to 12 step programs. In its heyday, it had more than a 100 such groups meeting in the facilities ~ a deep commitment. In those early decades it was commonplace in that congregation to hear accounts of changed lives under the power of the Spirit.



Yet as the congregation grew to become one of the highest status churches in all of Dallas, this part of their history and legacy came to be downplayed more and more. The congregation's identity no longer includes these elements considered less than savory. In their outreach materials these ministries are practically invisible today. It would seem to be no longer chic to talk in polite society of honest repentance and changed lives.

Such persons more interested in propriety and appearances are precisely the folks to whom Jesus addresses this parable.

Even though the notorious sinners flocked to John the Baptizer and Jesus, these folks are seldom seen flocking to our churches today.

However rarely, this does happen. Wes Lackey preached my ordination service. Wes was pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church on Cedar Springs Boulevard in Dallas. At that time the Love Field neighborhood surrounding the church had become, how shall we say this, the “red light” district of Dallas.



Wes cut a strange figure in laid-back Dallas of the day. Despite his Southern Baptist background, he was wont to wear his clergy collar all the time. At the customary gathering at a local bar after choir practice every week, Wes was always to be found complete with clergy collar in a booth nursing a beer.

Drawn to the collar and Wes' welcoming spirit, ladies of the evening and other denizens of the bar scene would come sit with Wes and unburden themselves. Often without knowing it, each wanted a connection, a word, a “welcome back” from God; and in Wes they got it. Each was seeking to reconnect, to return, to be restored. After a time, Wes looked out one Sunday morning and saw the front row of the congregation filled with prostitutes in their Sunday best.

We're not seeing these very folks flocking into Christ's community today perhaps because they don't see signs of the kingdom among us ~ maybe because we may not really demonstrate the powerful grace and love of God that can change people.

There's that word again that Jesus uses so often: *“change.”*

The ‘change’ word definitely scares us. We are always fearful of it even when it is wrapped up in God's gracious invitation. None of us thinks that we are the ones who say “yes” to God but fail to follow through. Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher, tells a parable of call and response not unlike Jesus' parable of the two sons sent into the vineyard:

Imagine a make believe country populated by ducks and geese. In this country is a barnyard full of geese. Into this barnyard flies a wild goose, a preacher. He is eloquent. He is charismatic and engaging. He tells the geese in the barnyard that they were given wings to fly. God intends for them to soar.



Their forebears flew across the great skies above, sometimes so thick they hid the sun. He has seen the world outside the barnyard. It is a wide and beautiful world, there is freedom in that world and unimaginable joy.

The geese think he is a wonderful preacher. They nod, say AMEN, applaud this preaching goose. Yet there is one thing they do not do ~ they do not fly. The barnyard walls are high and secure and the corn is plentiful, so they go back to their old familiar ways.¹

God wants us to fly. God wants us to soar. God wants us to respond to the invitation.

Jesus' point is that the first son is the one doing the will of the Father ~ the one who at first said "no" but later "*changed his mind*" and did as the Father requested. That's a key phrase "*changed his mind / changed her mind*" which Jesus pointedly emphasizes.



Jesus' question is also a question to us:

"Which of us does the will of God? Which of us wants to change?"



That's the Gospel. To enter God's story, to become a part of God's plan, Jesus calls us to a "changed mind," a new way of thinking, a new way of doing, a new way of living, a new way of being.

Our response to God's gracious invitation to become part of the kingdom work in God's vineyard: God wants us to say "yes" and really mean it. God wants our "yesses" to be real "yesses" and our "noes" to be repented of.

God invites us. God frees us. God wants us be all that we can be. God wants us to say "yes" and to do "yes" and to live "yes" and to be "yes." God wants us to be faith-filled and faithful sons and daughters who rejoice to enter the kingdom. God wants us to fly. God wants us to soar.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959) pp. 252-53