

The Parable of Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32)

²³ Jesus came back to the Temple; and as he taught, the chief priests and the elders came to him and asked, "What right do you have to do these things? Who gave you such right?" ²⁴ Jesus answered them, "I will ask you just one question, and if you give me an answer, I will tell you what right I have to do these things. ²⁵ Where did John's right to baptize come from: was it from God or from human beings?" They started to argue among themselves, "What shall we say? If we answer, 'From God,' he will say to us, 'Why, then, did you not believe John?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'From human beings,' we are afraid of what the people might do, because they are all convinced that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you, then, by what right I do these things.

²⁸ **"Now, what do you think? There was once a man who had two sons. He went to the older one and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ 'I don't want to,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. 'Yes, sir,' he answered, but he did not go. ³¹ Which one of the two did what his father wanted?"**

"The older one," they answered.

So Jesus said to them, "I tell you: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

Isaiah 55 v8-11

⁸ "My thoughts," says the LORD, "are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours. ⁹ **As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.** ¹⁰ "My word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat. ¹¹ So also will be the word that I speak—it will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do.

Intro

Who has ever made a new year's resolutions? And who has broken one before the end of January?

January is traditionally a month for appraising your life. Looking back to the previous year, and assessing what you want to do differently in the next one. So take a moment, to think back over the last year, and ask yourself this question. In my life, what is that I do, that consistently serves God. Things that you do that are Christian, and help bring about God's purposes on earth. And I don't particularly mean Church activities, though it may include that. What do I do that consistently serves God? Keep that in mind, and we'll come back to it.

Today's parable makes us look at our lives and what we do for God.

Context

John the Baptist, had been loved by the masses who flocked in large numbers to see him on the Jordan River, and be baptised as a sign of turning away from their old sins. He was heralded as Israel's first prophet for hundreds of years, and he heralded Jesus as the Messiah, but tore into the religious leaders because of their stubborn hearts, towards both him and Jesus.

John gets killed by Herod, and Jesus took on his status of being a prophet loved by the masses especially by the peasantry. After three years of ministry, he enters Jerusalem on a donkey, and even the children cried out and hailed him as 'the Son of David', the Messiah. This rankled with Jerusalem's temple leaders and Pharisees, who believed he was not from God, but just a nuisance from Galilee, and a dangerous one that could bring further disturbances in the temple, which could then cause the Romans to withdraw the privileges that they had. So the Pharisees who had invested much effort in trying to discredit him, now just wanted him dead. Jesus further

enrages them, by going into the temple courtyards and tipping over the tables of the moneylenders, and telling them that they had turned God's house into a den of thieves.

So they challenge him. "By whose authority are you doing these things". It's a good question, he may be a self-proclaimed Rabbi, but he is not part of the Temple's ruling body, the Sanhedrin, and seems to have no-one he is accountable to. Jesus knows where his authority comes from. Later just before he goes to the garden of Gethsemane, he prays for his disciples and thanks his Father for giving him authority over all humanity so that he can grant eternal life to his followers (John 17v2). But right now here in the temple, they are trying to expose him as an imposter, or try and get him to blaspheme in the temple, by saying he is the Son of God, and then they could arrest him before his time.

Jesus therefore answers their question with a question and it's a brilliant response. "Where did John the Baptist get his authority from?" The Pharisees huddle up into a rugby scrum, and discuss what they will say in response. It's a tricky one, if they say 'from God' then Jesus will say then why don't you believe what John said about me. But if we say he got his authority from Man, then the crowd will get angry with us because they thought John was a great prophet. So they decide to respond by saying "We don't know". Jesus smiles and says well if you won't answer **my** question, then I won't answer **yours**.

Jesus has come to promote the Kingdom of God on Earth, to bring people back to God and show them how to live. The Religious rulers should be getting behind him and helping him do this, but they are opposing him, just like they the religious leaders in Jerusalem opposed the prophets for centuries before him. It is in this context that he then tells the 'parable of the two sons' to his accusers. In the parable, the Father, as is often the case, represents God, and the vineyards represents God's kingdom, in other words, his work on earth that needs doing.

The First Son

So the farmer finds his two sons to ask them for help. He says to the first one:-

"Son, go today and work in the vineyard"

"I won't" he replied, but later changes his mind and went.

This first son represents all those who lived in rebellion with God, who broke his commands and lived sinful lives. The Religious leaders, the Pharisees, were very critical of such people, often picking on prostitutes, and those that collected the taxes for the Romans. But also on anyone who worked on the Sabbath, or just got on with their lives breaking others' strict laws that they were made up. These were generally referred to by the Pharisees as sinners. The first son, is wilfully disobedient at first, but something changes, perhaps after some thought and reflection, he decides to change his mind and do the right thing. This is true of some of the tax collectors and prostitutes that Jesus met, they turned their lives around including Zacchaeus. He was the despised chief tax collector in Jericho, who responds to Jesus' love by declaring he'll give back to the people far more than he cheated off them. Because he is given a name in the Gospel, it is probable that he became a church leader or prominent figure for the early church. So the first son represents those who initially deny God but then respond to his voice and get stuck into serving him.

The Second Son

The Father then goes to his second boy and says the same thing.

"Son, go and work in the vineyard today"

"Yes of course" he replies, but then doesn't go.

These represent people that look like they are following God and working hard for him, because they look the part and seem to be saying the right things. But actually their actions don't match up to their words.

It was natural for a father to go and ask his son to work in the vineyard. That a son should refuse to go, would have been viewed as unacceptable. The first son was an openly disobedient son, and disobedience to your father was a

punishable offence. However for the second son, failing to go and help after promising your Father was clearly worse, because he violated his word to his own father.

Jesus asks his accusers. “Which of the two did what his Father wanted?” It seemed an obvious and harmless question. To the Pharisees the answer was clear, and they said so.. The son that refused to go, but then repented of his disobedience clearly acted preferably of the two.

The Error of the Pharisees

Then the mood changes, Jesus points at the Pharisees and says to these Religious leaders. ‘I tell you, the prostitutes and tax-collectors are going into the kingdom of God before you’. It was a shocking thing to say to them, but it was true and Jesus then gives them one good reason why, and it doing so ties it back it to the questions on whose authority John the Baptist and Jesus did what they did.

(v32) “For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this, you did not later change your minds and believe him.”

Generally speaking, the Pharisees for all their scriptural knowledge, and showmanship and clever words, were not getting behind and supporting the work that God was doing through John and Jesus. Whereas there were Pharisees and Tax Collectors that were! AT least some were.

So both sons have in some way behaved badly, but the second son had clearly behaved worse. So Jesus says to the Pharisees ‘ you may look down on Prostitute’s and Tax Collectors, who have done wrong in Gods eyes, but in all your pride and stubbornness, you are actually worse than them, at least they were open to Johns teaching and now my teaching, with some turning back to God and helping me to do my Fathers work, but you don’t.

So that is the context in which the parable is told. It sits within this question – Under whose authority do you do the things you do? As we look back over our recent life, it is a good question to ask ourselves. By whose authority do we do the things we do,? Is our authority from God or man. In other words do we align our lives with what he wants for us, or just what we want for ourselves.

With that in mind, lets look at the words of the Father in the parable, and apply those words to ourselves

The Fathers Vineyard

The Father says – “Son, go and work in the vineyard today“

First of when we say son, of course we mean son or daughter, because Jesus is the king of diversity and includes us all. So this applies to all men and woman. But what is our vineyard? Well most of us won’t live on a farm which grows grapes. Quite simply, it’s the world we live in. A world of great need.

15 million inject illegal drugs into themselves

18 million acres of valuable forest are lost to the planet every year.

40 million slaves are being trafficking mostly for the sex industry.

60 million refugees

800 million people go to bed hungry each night.

1 billion children live in poverty.

5 billion don’t have a Christian faith.

My elderly next door neighbour is poorly and has no immediate family to help her.

Jesus said “ **The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the Harvest therefore to send out workers into his harvest field**” (Luke 10v2). With statistics like that, it might seem that it's not worth trying.

Mother Theresa once said “**Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.**” We can organise our lives, so that day by day we are making a difference.

But you are not alone. You are in a community of 2 billion Christians, and Jesus is with you equipping you. Imagine what we could achieve if 2 billion of us were all day by day were **just** doing **small** things with great love. But Jesus also says that through him ‘**all things are possible**’ and **that we can do the great things he did and even greater things. (John 14v12)**

There is no shortage of things you can do for Jesus, but why wait to get stuck in.

The Father says – “**Son (daughter), go and work in the vineyard today**”.

The Urgency

Jesus stresses an urgency about going about his work today, not leaving it until tomorrow.

God is eternal, so presumably he has absolutely ages to get done what he wants, and yet **he** seems to have a sense of urgency, and want us to make a start straight away, today and every day.

We, who are on the planet for a very short while, seem much happier to put working for God off for another day.

But if every one of the 2.2bn Christians put off serving God's purposes for just one week, we would have lost 42 million years of Christian service between us. Now that's a lot of poor people not getting fed, sick not being visited or healed, people not being freed from sex-trafficking, and perhaps most tragically, with a million people dying in the world every week, a lot of them would have died without knowing Jesus, who might otherwise have done so, if they had been told the truth in that week.

Life is uncertain, and the opportunities that any one person is presented with, to accept Jesus into their lives, are limited. There is an urgency, because time soon runs out for individuals to hear about Jesus. You never know what will happen to them tomorrow, what will happen to you tomorrow.

Family

There is one more important aspect of the Father's request in our parable. The Father says

“**Son, go and work in the vineyard today**” We are indeed saved by God's Grace, by his gift of Jesus Christ, and by his free outpouring on us of his love and mercy. Because of this amazing grace, we are also adopted into the family of God. Paul says to the Galatians “You are his son or daughter, who are greatly loved. “ (Galatians 4:7). Everything that God owns belongs to us as well because we belong to Him. We have an eternal inheritance as co-heirs with Jesus Christ .

Our first priority is **not** to serve God but to allow him to love us., and when we realise how much he loves us, and all he has done for us and will do for us, then we can't help but love him back. The reason we were created was to have this love relationship with God.

It is then, in response to his love that we want to please him, to do good works for him. We do it, not because we have to, to earn our salvation, or to earn blessings or good favour in this life. We do it in response to his love for us. We serve him because we want to, and because we know that he knows what is best for our lives, and part of that best, is the good works that he has prepared for us to do. Isaiah 55 says **9As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.** He is so much better ay

knowing what is best for our lives than we are. If we do not set out to consistently serve him, then it is **us** that misses out most.

If you have ever made that decision to follow Jesus, if you call yourself a Christian, then that means you have accepted your place as an adopted child in the family of God. The Pharisees asked by whose authority did Jesus do the things he did, and of course his authority came directly from God. We need to recognise his **authority** over us as Father, and that our authority on Earth comes from him, just as it did for Jesus. We have great privileges and authority as a member of Gods family, but with that comes responsibilities too, one of which is to come alongside Jesus and to help bring in the harvest, to do Gods work in a willing and cheerful way. We were designed to work 6 days a week ,and to do Gods work. So surely just as the Father in the parable can rightly expect help from his sons, Jesus should be able to expect us to consistently help him. He said 'I must be about my Father business (Luke 2v49). We shouldn't think any differently.

SO what is our response going to be to the Fathers words **“Son, go and work in the vineyard today”**

Work to do – two reponses

The first child, says no but then undergoes a change. This could be many of us here, who had a period of life where we were clearly doing things wrong, and perhaps led a destructive life-style. But there came a day when we realised we needed Jesus, and started trying to follow him and do his work. We may often fail and let ourselves down, but we pick ourselves up and carry on doing what we can for God, not letting our past hold us back. It may be that you've always said yes to God, that from the earliest age and done your best to serve him, that's got to be the ideal for you and God a whole life involved in the great things he has planned you. *Either way, looking back over your last year, If this is you – well done- keep going.*

The second child looks good at first glance. This can be some-one that has had a conversion experience, goes to Church regularly and comes across perhaps as some-one who is a good hard-working Christian. But when you examine this life you see they have an agenda, which like the Pharisees, is set under their own authority and not Gods, such that the persons time, money and priorities are self-focussed, working in their own vineyard, and Gods work in not getting a proper look in. There may be smiles, good intentions, and good banter, and no realisation that anything is wrong, but nothing that has eternal value is getting done! There is no time to serve the Church in anyway up-front or back room , there is no witness to friends and neighbours, or active support or involvement in mission work at home or abroad.

It's a tough question, but looking back over your last year, is this something you recognise in yourself. If that's the case, then it's time to re-evaluate, let God who knows you best, have authority of what you do, and restructure your time, so that it includes time to do his work.

What needs to change

So we come back to question, how have you set up your life to consistently serve God the Father, and work alongside Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in bringing home the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. How are you doing? Are you under Gods authority looking to him for your life choices.

What needs to change, so that in 12 months time, you know that you are consistently served God with your life, and probably had a lot of fun doing it. Listen to what God might be telling you, and make a plan. If you fail to plan, then you are planning to fail.

It doesn't matter if you messed up last year, pick yourself up, and go again. God never gives up on you. You can do it, because as you step out of your comfort zone and give it a go, God is worth, and he is able. When God asks you to do something, the only qualifications you need are his strength and his ability. The rest is on the job training. You don't need confidence in yourself, you need confidence in the God who lives within you. Without that you are like a

plane without fuel sat on the runway, you look good but you have no power to achieve anything. You just have to trust God and act on his urging, and let him do the work through you.

Get out there and get stuck it. One way of looking at it is as working on the vineyard, but that imagery alone I think is not full enough as it doesn't describe the joy of being out there seeing God work through you and your friends. As an occasional DJ, I like the imagery from a Chris Tomlin's songs, of Gods dance floor.

*Take me: This is all I can bring.
All of heaven shouts let the future begin
I **feel** alive, I **come** alive
I **am** alive on God's great dance floor*

If you feel you can, then please in your hearts pray this prayer with me.

Lord, In response to your love, and all you have given me, I make myself available to you. Be in charge of my life, so that I come under your authority. Lord I want to better align my life, my resources, my finance, my time and my love, to better serve you, and **consistently serve** you. So please help me and empower me through your Holy Spirit to work with you on the things of eternal value. Amen.