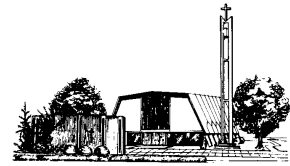


Campbell United Methodist Church

The Weekly Sermon



The Two Sons or The Better of the Two Bad Sons
Rev. Daniel Gbundema
January 30, 2011
Matthew 21:28-32

For the past few Sundays we have been exploring the parables of Jesus as presented by Matthew and how they affect our inner spiritual and emotional souls. We have explored the hidden treasure and experienced the joy in discovery. We have explored the Mustard Seed that teaches us that the kingdom of God is planted within us. We looked at the parable of the wheat and the weeds that teaches us to allow the wheat and the weeds to grow together, because it is highly probably that we can make use of the weeds in the future... our weeds for spiritual growth in the future.

We will look, this morning, at the parable of **the two sons... or the better of the two bad sons**, if you will. Some people like to frame this story as a question as to which is the better of the two "bad boys". As I reflect on this story, I do want to acknowledge that **...repentance and actual obedience are much more acceptable to God, rather than lip service. In other words, the Christian way is in performance and not promises. The Christian life is to be graciously and courteously given.**

The parable sets before us a set of two imperfect people, and some will say one is better than the other.

Let me re-tell the story.

Jesus said in response to his critics;

Look, what do you think? A man has two sons and went to the first and told him to do very important work for him in the field or yard. Presumably that is the field where the father gets money to feed the family and pay the bills. It is important to note that we are dealing with a typical Palestinian agricultural society, and its traditional land tenure system. Cultivating the land and raising the crops were basic to survival. The household income depended on the land and cultivation of the crops.

One son said "I will not go... I'm not going to do that!" But later, he changed his mind and went and did the work the father told him to do.

The father went to the second son with the same request, "Son, please go to the farm today and do some work for me and the family. The second son said, "I will certainly go, sir" but then, did not go. The story ends. Jesus then asked his hearers; "Which of the two sons did the will of his father?"

The later part of verses 31-32, indicting tax collectors and prostitutes could be a later addition, and may not have been part of the original saying of Jesus. But the

writer probably added these words to make a point. When we compare to the story of the Pharisees and the publican in Luke 18:10-14 to this part of the story we see a point...**and it is simply this: what really counts with God is righteous conduct. Also -even those who do not know they are working for God will be rewarded.**

Jesus may have spoken the parable to justify his work or ministry to those who had been negative about him, those who call him names, and those who rejected him for eating with sinners and spending time with the questionable people in his society. Jesus had worked for most of his ministry with the country people, people who were out of touch with the main streams of Judaism and were regarded as irreligious. Jesus was somebody who went to the people who were marginalized and cast out in his society. Many of the leaders of his day were always in contention with what he had to offer... and especially with what he offered to those they saw as irreligious - the marginalized, the outcasts, and the questionable people in society. In this parable, and many other parables, Jesus was responding to the so-called religious people and trying to justify his own actions and teachings.

The parable of the two sons, like many other parables, is a direct challenge to the formal teachings of the so-called religious people. It was a call to see the neglected people as part of God's creation, people created in the image of God and citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus clearly saw and taught that many people who are classed as "irreligious" are often awakened to a realization of their spiritual needs, much more so than those who appeared to be more religious and are often impervious to the gospel.

As I reflect on this parable I see the second son as a token of formal religion. He was insincere in the first place. He probably intended to obey his father and do what his father sent him to do. But he didn't.

Have you ever been there? Where people agree with you only to be polite but in reality they are disagreeing with you. What are the possible reasons to justify why the second son didn't do his father's will after agreeing to do it? Why do people call Jesus "Lord, Lord" today but do not do his will? Have those who call Jesus "Lord, Lord," and not done his will entered the kingdom? Will they ever enter the kingdom? What about those who denied Jesus in the past but came to obey him?

Christianity, appeals to our reason, especially when we are faced with the tragic events of unchristian ways of life. We are drawn to Christianity because it appeals to our emotions. We read and hear about the tragic death of Jesus on the cross, and we are pleased to hear the salvation story. We worship and enjoy the good rhythms in church and elsewhere, but the discipline of keeping to the faith, and obedience, is hard for us. Though we vow to obey and pledge our allegiance for Christ that we will go when and where we are sent... yet often, we do not go

The first son points us to a high religion. He had been curt and rebellious and prefers to do his own will. He repented when he came to his senses. I am sure not many of us will raise our hands to say we have not been in such position in life. The fact is that this son may have meditated on life and faced the facts of conscience. Furthermore, he may have put aside his pride to do his father's will.

It is a terrible reality today that the human race is not ashamed to sin, but is ashamed to confess faults or sin. Pride dies hard in the human soul, but this one son admitted his wrong and then he tried to correct it without making any excuses.

The story indicates that there were those who do not keep the laws but indeed they obey God and are called into the new kingdom of God. There were also those who called themselves, the custodians of the law who thought that by doing the rituals they were obeying the laws, but were judged and convicted.

In other words, Jesus was replying to his critics who said they will go do the work of the father (God) but didn't actually do it. The ideal son will be the one who accepts his father's order with obedience and respect, and carries out the orders of his father in deed rather than simply with lip service.

As I go through this story I see two classes of people.

The first class will be those who profess more than they practice. These are people who will promise everything and make noise of religious piety and fidelity. These are people who will say "Look, I am good, I pay my dues and do well and make sure that I do my rituals in the church. I am educated and know the Torah and the scriptures. I can tell you what the Bible means. I have the answers. Just listen to me." This mind-set casts blame, points a finger, and condemns others when in fact their own moral, religious and spiritual practices are lagging.

The other class is one that practices much better than they profess. These are who have no interest in spiritual or religious matters, as such, but whom somehow secretly do good and kind things in the community and even sometimes in the church. Sometimes some of these people demonstrate a more Christian lifestyle than those who profess to be Christians.

The story tells about two kinds of people, and at different times we can all experience both... sanctimonious characters on the one hand, and irreligious characters on the other hand. There is no perfection on either side. None meets the standards set by Christ. Neither of the two sons, nor the two classes of people, achieved the Christ-like standard.

Reflecting further, I see that we cannot put promises in the place of performance. What I am emphasizing is that we cannot say "yes" to God's work and then turn our backs. Jesus says, "No one who puts his hand on the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. (Luke 9:62). This is a hard theological and Biblical statement. But all we have to do is to keep to our promises. Say it and do it ...and do it good. Fine words can never be a substitute for fine deeds. That's what the

Kingdom of God is like....repentance and actual obedience are required in the Kingdom of God.

Even as I live in this part of the world, thousands of miles from my homeland, I still serve my Lord. I made a vow back in the early 90s to be ordained in the United Methodist Church. I told my Lord "I will go," and I am still on the go! I have not abandoned my call, whether times were good or difficult.

The son who said I will go and did not go had all the outward expression of courtesy. He replied to his father with full respect "Sir, I will go". This is a reminder that sometimes we spoil the very things we cherish by the ways we do the things. We sometimes in our religiosity do things with the lack of graciousness and end up spoiling everything we are trying to do. As we journey in this spiritual path, let us be mindful of what we say and what we do in fulfilling the master's work.

Where do we find our selves today? Professing and not practicing? Practicing and not professing? Or are we one of those who always say "I will go Lord," but do not, or the one who says "I will not" but has a change of mind and goes anyway? Professing and practicing go together. Promises that go with performance can change the world for the better.

Let us go and do God's will as God calls us and sends us... Amen.