

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2020

(Matthew 21:23-32)

This morning's parable is one in which Jesus once again challenges the assumptions of his listeners. He challenges their sense of comfort by making them uncomfortable. He challenges the view of importance – their feelings of *self-importance* – by flipping the traditional view of *who* in his time was important. Of course, the deeper lesson is just as relevant to us today.

As we read, Jesus has entered the Temple in Jerusalem and is engaged in teaching those gathered around him. In that moment, the chief priests and the elders – those recognized as authority figures within the Temple complex and the larger community – come to him to try once more to trap him with his own words. He responds to them by questioning whether they truly understood the lessons of John the Baptist and his call to turn away from sin to righteousness, and he does so in a traditional rhetorical style indicated by his use of the phrase “What do you think?” It is a rabbinic-style of interrogation or request for a verdict.¹ The respondent has now become the inquisitor and points out to them something crucial they don't seem to know ... and he does it with a parable.

It is a parable in which Jesus shares a vision of what it looks like when those who seem least likely to enter the kingdom of God become the very ones who jump to the head of the line. It is a parable of priority. It is a parable of *repentance*.

Now as much as I love the translation of the Bible that we typically use in our liturgy, the New Revised Standard Version, I will say I think we're shorted by the way two particular words are translated. First, consider the translation of the word “sons.” In looking at the original Greek, the word *tekna* doesn't translate as “sons” but rather as “offspring” or “children.”² So at the outset, that one consideration makes what Jesus is sharing applicable – and the message important – to *everyone*. That is the translation I will use moving forward.

Then as we read further in the parable, we find that the first child who moved from originally refusing to go to the vineyard to instead going to work experienced a change of mind. However, in again returning to the original Greek for this verse and looking at the word *metamelomai* or its form *metameletheis* we uncover a different, more accurate translation: “regret” or “repent.”³

The first child felt regret over the original decision and reversed course, recognizing the sin committed and opting for repentance. The second child, who first said they would go into the vineyard and then failed to follow through on that promise, also experienced a change of mind. However, it was a change in which they knowingly went against the request of the father. Through this, Jesus points out quite clearly that the sinners are the ones who are

¹ Craig S. Keener. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 507.

² Scripture4All Interlinear, <https://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/NTpdf/mat21.pdf>.

³ Strong's Online Greek Concordance, <https://biblehub.com/greek/3338.htm>.

doing – the ones who are repenting – while the leaders who have confronted him are the ones *doing nothing* and turning further away from God.

Consider this more deeply. The first child did something; the second did not. Things done and not done. Both have done wrong, one sibling in word and one in deed; through this we are reminded that *all* have fallen short.⁴ The actions – the decisions – of the two children are reflected in the words of the Confession that we will shortly say together. “We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.”⁵

Repentance is about much more than apologizing; it is much more than acknowledging our errors; it is much more than our own individual confession. It is about a change in the direction of our life ... of continuing to strengthen our communal life and build up the family of God. “No church” – no community – “can exist if people who consistently break the rules and come back saying, ‘I am sorry,’ are not fully restored to membership.”⁶ To do that, we have to recognize the importance for mercy ... the importance of offering it to one another, but the greater importance of opening ourselves to the gift of mercy from God.

Sometimes, that means overcoming the stumbling blocks we sometimes manage to put in our own paths ... the stumbling blocks of ego, or self-reliance, or perhaps even our own arrogance. As C. S. Lewis wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*, “[Repentance] means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into... It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death.”⁷

Confession and repentance are a form of dying ... a death of the old parts of our lives that we somehow can’t always get rid of and sometimes continue carry on our backs, a load of stones that gets heavier and heavier with each step. But if we have learned anything from the fullness of Jesus’ life, death is only the beginning of the journey – a journey that continues with resurrection. When we sin, in those things done and left undone, we die a bit; when we repent ... when we confess ... when we choose to work in the vineyard ... we experience a resurrection. We begin to shed the stones from the load on our back. We receive the gift of renewing our membership among the children of God.

We receive the promised gift of God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Amen.

⁴ David Lewicki, “Matthew 21:28-32 – Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 2* (Kindle edition).

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 360 (and others).

⁶ Lewicki.

⁷ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins edition, 2001), p. 57.