

**Introduction:** The last two parables we studied were the “Two Lost Sons” and “The Pharisee and Tax Collector.” Both these parables are stark reminders that there are two contrasting ways to be “lost” to God. The first way is to be a sinner in open rebellion to God. The second way is to be a person who outwardly obeys God’s commands, but whose heart is not committed to God. Obedience from the heart is what God requires.

In the parable of the “Pharisee and Tax Collector,” we saw the Pharisee, who although scrupulously outwardly obeys the Law, demonstrate that he is actually far from God. He goes to the Temple to pray. As he prays, he praises himself and condemns those he considers ungodly whom he calls robbers, evildoers, and adulterers. Near him in the Temple is a tax Collector who is also praying. The Tax Collector is humble and contrite before God. The tax collector simply prays “*God have mercy on me, a sinner.*” Jesus says that the tax collector not the Pharisee went home justified before God.

**Two Sons and the Vineyard:** Jesus spoke this next parable in the Temple on the day after His triumphal entry to Jerusalem. It is the first of a trio of parables.

As found in the first half of Matthew 21, Jesus performed three symbolic actions in the preceding days. (1.) First, His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, thereby, presenting Himself as Israel’s true King and Messiah. (2.) Next, on Monday cleansing the Temple, casting out the commercial aspects like money changers and sellers of animals for sacrifice, thus restoring the Temple to its God-given function of “a house of prayer.” (3.) Surprisingly, earlier on Monday, He cursed a fig tree. The fig tree is one on the symbols used to represent Israel. Another symbol was the grape vine. Jesus saw a fig tree of a type which usually had early fruit before it had leaves. But though this tree had leaves, it had no fruit. Israel was like that. Growth and leaves but little spiritual fruit. Jesus’ cursed the tree as a symbol of God’s coming judgment on the nation for its failure to produce spiritual fruit. As you know that judgment resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD.

On the second day after His triumphal entry to Jerusalem, Jesus went to the Temple to teach. While He was teaching, the chief priests and elders, who were no doubt agitated because of the good reception Jesus had received as He came into Jerusalem, came to Him and questioned His authority to teach. Jesus responded with His own question, one they were afraid to answer.

**Matthew 21:23-27**: *“And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’<sup>24</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.<sup>25</sup> The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?’ And they discussed it among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’<sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”<sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”*

Jesus spoke three parables related to the three earlier symbolic actions. The three parables are “Two Sons and the Vineyard,” the “Wicked Tenants,” and “The Wedding Feast.” The first is brief but powerful, illustrating forcefully the old saying that “actions speak louder than words.” The second parable concludes with *“They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.’* That is the message of the withering fig tree. It had leaves and should have been producing fruit but was not.

All three parables were directed to the chief priests and Pharisees. They knew Jesus was talking about them. Matthew 21:45, *“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.”*

### **“Two Sons and the Vineyard.”**

**Matthew 21:28-32** *“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’<sup>29</sup> And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went.<sup>30</sup> And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go.<sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.<sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.”*

The father in the parable owns a vineyard which apparently needs immediate attention. God, our heavenly Father, likewise has work for us which requires immediate attention. Jesus tells us what that work is in John 6:29b, ***“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”*** In the parable, the father commands the sons to work in the vineyard. This parable, then, applies not only to salvation but also to work in the world on behalf of the Father.

**The Father’s Command:** The father is anxious to get some essential work done in his vineyard. He has two sons and expects them to obediently help with that work. He goes to his first son and tells him to go immediately to the vineyard and work. The first son says he will not. He made no promise to work and had no intent of doing so. He was openly disobedient, unresponsive to the needs of the vineyard or the command of his father.

The father then tells the second son to go to the vineyard and work. The second son says “sure,” I will go. Yet, though he promised obedience, he apparently never intended to keep his word. This son makes an insincere promise. Jesus is against insincere professions, professions from people, who come to Him and hear His words, but do not do them. In Luke 6:46, Jesus said, ***“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”*** That is the second son’s problem. He hears his father’s words, agrees with them, professes he will carry out the father’s command, but did not carry through and do what he promised.

Sincere or genuine professions are linked by Scripture to true belief in Jesus. Paul, in Romans 10:9-10 says, ***“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”*** But insincere or lying professions, whatever the subject, are simply sin.

**One Son has a Change of Heart:** Later, the first son changed his mind, went to the vineyard and worked. The second son, who declared his willingness to work, did nothing.

What are we to make of this? In the parable, the father with two sons represents God. The two sons represent two contrasting categories of people: (1.) Open sinners who come to their sense and are willing to repent. (2.) Self-righteous people who see no need for repentance.

The first son, who flatly refuses to work in the vineyard, but later changes his mind, goes to the vineyard and does the necessary work, represents sinners who recognize and admit their sin, repent and turn to God prepared to obediently do what God commands (see 1 Corinthians 1:26-27). Jesus represents this category of sinners of this category by tax collectors and prostitutes. They were sinners, knew it, listened carefully to Jesus, and many followed Him.

Under the Spirit-inspired preaching of John the Baptist, the message of sin and repentance sank deeply into the hearts of many who were considered outcasts and undesirables. They repented and became God's adopted children, ready to work in God's vineyard.

On the other hand, many, maybe most of priests, Pharisees, and elders were unmoved by John the Baptist's stern preaching. They were satisfied with the position they believed they had before God. Notorious sinners heard John's preaching, their hearts were changed, and they repented, but most of the religious elite did not respond in that way.

**The Unrepentant Second Son:** The second son, who promised to work but never showed up, specifically represents the leaders of Israel. These leaders were bound by the nation's covenant with God, but ignored it. More generally, the second son represents people who profess God but ignore Him in their daily lives. This was true of most of the chief priests, Pharisees, scribes, elders, and other religious leaders. They were religiously powerful, but were as far from heart-obedience to God, as the outcasts. They were diligent in their outward obedience but negligent in the far greater "heart-obedience."

Both sons hear the father's request to work in the vineyard and no doubt hear the father's reason for urgency. The first son just says "NO" to the father. He is guilty of the sin of rebellion, deliberate opposition to the father's request.

The second son responds to the father with a pleasant lie, intentionally misrepresenting what he intends to do. As intended from the beginning, he does not go to the vineyard, simply continues doing what he had planned.

**Which Son is Better:** At this point, there seems little, if any, reason to say the response of one son is better than the other. Both are guilty of sin. Both have broken God's commandment to honor their father.

But their ultimate actions reveal them to be different at heart. After his blunt, rebellious, refusal, the first son repents and goes to the vineyard. He does what his father wants. On the other hand, the second son, who so promptly promised to do what the father asked, does nothing. The first son changes his behavior from bad to good, but the second son's promise to work remains mere deception.

**The Key Question:** Toward the end of the parable, Jesus poses the question: "*Which of the two did the will of his father?*" The obvious answer, and the one Jesus gets from the chief priests and Pharisees, is that the one who repented and went to work in the vineyard did his fathers' will. Using that response, Jesus tells the Pharisees that tax collectors and harlots will go in to His Kingdom before them.

The reason is simple. Many of these blatant sinners were believing and repenting, while the "religious" elite did not. Jesus implies there is more hope for those who are consciously wicked than for those who are self-satisfied with their outwardly obedient spiritual condition. The overall problem is that no one of their own accord can achieve righteousness that will endure before the Father. Only the acquired righteousness of Jesus will suffice.

Consider Jesus' comment that "*the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.*" Self-righteousness and outward obedience to the Law is insufficient. But notice, Jesus' comment clearly left the door open for this category of people to come to their senses and repent. Jesus did not say "tax collectors and prostitutes" go into the Kingdom of God "*instead of you.*" He said they go "*before you,*" that is in front of you. This certainly suggests that all of them could, and some of them would, believe, repent and follow saved sinners into the Kingdom.

Can you think of an example? Consider Saul, born in Tarsus, citizen of Rome, a Pharisee trained in Jerusalem by Gamaliel. He was an avid persecutor of believers, a man who later in life claimed to be the chief of sinners. Who would ever have guessed he would become the Apostle Paul, apostle?

The message of this parable is that talking about doing God's will is of no value. But actually doing God's will is of vital importance.

**What is Next:** The parable of the "Wicked Tenants."

