

June 2, 2019

“The Parable of the Two Sons”

Matthew 21:28-32

FCF: Assumptions we make about a relationship with God

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Jesus makes clear how we may enter His kingdom.
(anchor) We need to lay aside our ideas on this and hear Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

According to news outlets, NASA is planning on establishing a sustained human presence on the moon by 2028. That’s a tall order and, to do it, they will need to recruit some special people. The astronaut selection process is rigorous. You have to be in top physical shape with proven technical skills. Then comes the training - on simulators, in the classroom, and in the field. Why such a rigorous process? Because life in space and on the moon is very different than life on Earth. You have to adapt. You simply can’t transfer this way of living over to that.

We have the same challenge in how we think about a relationship with God. Too often, we assume that a relationship with Him is much like any other. But it’s fundamentally different.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 21:28-32](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

This is the time of year when graduation speeches are given and endured. But they can be worth reflecting on. Patricia Raybon makes some good observations in a recent piece for *Christianity Today*. When Apple’s Steve Jobs gave the commencement address at Stanford University in June 2005, he pressed the graduates to follow their hearts ([READ quotes](#)). “Your time is limited,” he said. “So, don’t waste it living someone else’s life...Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.” That idea has taken hold and been repeated countless times.

But what do we make of it? It’s “garbage advice,” says startup expert Michal Bohanes. “One of the great lies of life,” says billionaire entrepreneur Mark Cuban. Cal Newport, author of *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*, says Jobs’ blissful view of life is “not particularly useful.” Worse, two Stanford University researchers conducted a 2018 study - not far from where Jobs gave his speech - and state that “following your passion” may bring more failure than success.

Why do I bring this up? Some things are often quoted but rarely questioned. They are fictions we continue to believe and poisons we continue to swallow. Much like the lies we take in about the spiritual life - who God is, who we are, and how we can be in relationship with Him.

The context of this story Jesus tells is His pushback on the questioning of His authority. “Where do you get off saying and doing such things?” He’s asked. He’s answering. And, as He does so, Jesus makes clear how we may enter His kingdom. We need to lay aside our ideas on this and hear Him. The parable has two points. First, a warning. And, second, an invitation.

I. A WARNING TO ONE

First, the warning to one. Despite what you want to believe, salvation and standing with God is not by works. That is not how we enter Jesus’ kingdom ([READ Matthew 21:28-32](#)).

A) The Second Son

There are two sons here. Let's start by taking a look at the second one first.

1. Concerned with appearances

How could we describe him? Concerned with appearances, he says one thing and does another. His priority is in how he looks, his outer righteousness and piety, not inward integrity and truth.

2. Assessment

How would Jesus' hearers have assessed this? By far, the response of the second son is the worst of the two. There wasn't the initial refusal as with the other son. But there was obvious deceit.

B) The Religious

Who does he represent? The religious. Specifically, we see ([READ Matthew 21:23](#)).

1. Who they were

Who were these men? Members of the Sanhedrin, Israel's supreme court. The chief priests and elders - this was the priestly aristocracy and the heads of the most influential lay families.

2. How they were regarded

How were they regarded? They were respected, revered, prestigious, and empowered.

And Jesus meant to equate them with the second son in the parable. This had to have been shocking. But it was a warning to them as to who could enter His kingdom and how.

Application:

It is not by works. Outer righteousness and piety are not enough. It is not enough to make promises to God, to claim to believe, to recite a creed, or to do good things. What counts is actual devotion, love of God and love of neighbor, an inward reality matching the outward life.

These are strong words. This may be something some of us need to hear. Jesus makes clear how we may enter His kingdom. We need to lay aside our ideas on this and hear Him.

II. AN INVITATION TO THE OTHER

What about the first son? Here we see a shift from a warning to an invitation. This is clearly implied. Despite what you may fear to believe, salvation and standing with God is not by works. That is not how we enter the kingdom. It is by grace ([READ Matthew 21:28-32](#)).

A) The First Son

1. Concerned with reality

How would we describe the first son? He is not concerned with appearances but with reality. Initially, he absolutely refuses. There is no pretense or pretending with him. He starts poorly but ends well. He comes back. So he is the one who ultimately trusted and submitted to the father.

2. Assessment

And how would Jesus' hearers have assessed him? Not that the initial refusal would have been commended in any way. That was profoundly disrespectful. But his response is the one held up.

B) The Sinners

So who does he represent? Certainly not the religious or the righteous but the sinners.

1. Who they were

Tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the occupying Roman army, greedy for gain and traitors of their people. And prostitutes? Sex is a good gift of God, not something to be bought and sold broadly as a commodity but something to be kept and treasured solely within marriage.

2. How they were regarded

So how would such people have been regarded? As the scum of society, the lowest of the low, looked down upon by the religious and the righteous. Hardly heroic or model citizens.

And Jesus means to equate them with the first son in the parable. Now think of how shocking this had to have been. But this is the invitation. It is not by works but by grace.

Application:

Anyone can repent, believe, and enter the kingdom. Anyone can come to Jesus. The warning to the second son is, "It's never enough to do those things." But the invitation to the first son is, "It's never too late. No one is too far gone." There is a place for you. Just come.

These are needed words. This may be something some of us need to hear. Jesus makes clear how we may enter His kingdom. We need to lay aside our ideas on this and hear Him.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus' message to both the religious and the sinner is to repent and to believe, to turn from our self-righteousness, our self-dependence, and back to God. The only way forward is the path of repentance. John Stott was known for many years for his commentaries and other books. He was also a bird watcher. In his book, *The Birds Our Teachers*, he wrote ([READ quote](#)):

All over the world the same mysterious North-South, South-North pattern of bird migration is repeated. The most extraordinary example is the Arctic Tern. Breeding in northern Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Lapland and Siberia, it winters as far south as the southernmost tips of South Africa and South America. Although it weighs only about four ounces, it flies from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back again every year, which makes a round trip of some 22,000 miles and is the most extensive migration of any bird.

Nearly as sensational is the American Golden Plover. Those whose nesting ground is in Alaska cross about 2,000 miles of open ocean non-stop to the Hawaiian islands, while some even fly on to Australia and New Zealand. Those which breed in the Eastern Arctic, however, fly non-stop from Labrador to Patagonia, which is about 2,800 miles.

Thus it is that birds 'observe the time of their migration', and do so with extraordinary regularity and precision. And what birds do by instinct (by inbuilt, inherited migrational skills which scientists have not yet fully fathomed), we human beings should do by deliberate choice, returning from our self-centred ways to the living God our Creator.

My friends, Stott was absolutely right. The birds are our teachers on this and we need to turn.

And it is a mark of the Lord's love and kindness to us that He gives us such reminders. Each season, each migration is yet another message pressing upon us our need to turn away from our sin and turn back to the Lord, to repent. But not just a reminder of our need to turn but a reminder of the mercy of the One to whom we then turn towards. We are turning towards Jesus.

Again, Jesus makes clear how we may enter His kingdom. We need to hear Him.

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