

The Two Sons

Fr. Robert J. Wagner

9/27/17



Gospel Commentary Mt 21:28-32

There is something a bit perplexing about the parable of the two sons, one who tells his father that he will work in the vineyard and does not, and the other says he will not but then does. Perhaps it is because so many other details are missing. Why did they first respond to their father's request the way they each did? Was the first son deliberately deceiving his father knowing he would never obey him as he promised? Why did the second son have a change of heart?

We may try to steer away from that discomfort by convincing ourselves that the parable has nothing to do with us. Jesus directed it at the chief priests and elders, and it makes sense to compare some of the religious leaders of that time to the first son. They spoke of their faithfulness to the Heavenly Father, but then when He sent His only-begotten Son, they rejected and crucified Him. It also follows that the tax collectors and sinners who responded to Christ's call to conversion are like the second son, for they were denying God through their sinful lives, yet gave themselves over to Him after hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We know that every word of Our Lord is eternal and speaks to us in every age. So what is Jesus telling us through these two sons? Likely, we would all agree that we would rather not identify with either one. Instead, most of us would prefer to be compared to a third son, one who says he will work in

the vineyard and then does. We want to be known as men and women whose yes means yes and whose faith is integrated into our actions so that what we preach is what we practice.

No doubt there are many instances when this is true. Yet, it does not take too much introspection to realize that every follower of Jesus shares something in common with each of the two sons. It is hard to admit, but too often we are like the first son. We confess as Christians that we want to follow the will of God, and yet every time we sin, we do the opposite. How many times each day do we turn away from our Heavenly Father through the words we speak or the deeds we commit or fail to commit?

Each evening, it is a worthy spiritual practice to think through the times when we have sinned against God, but not because we want to wallow in our disobedience and disappointment. Instead, we do this so we may better recognize the ways that the evil one leads us astray and more easily be on guard against his future attacks. More importantly, we examine our consciences so we may ask Our Lord for forgiveness for our sins, while also taking the time to confess them regularly to receive God's mercy in the Sacrament of Penance.

This repentance leads us to conversion. When we recognize our sins, receive forgiveness and give our lives more fully to Jesus Christ, we imitate the second son of the parable, who turns back to the father after first rejecting him. This is the son who realizes that loving service to his father is where his peace and fulfillment lie. This is what we as disciples of Jesus Christ are called to do as well.

While we wish we could say that we always say yes to God and live our lives perfectly to match that promise of faithfulness, we know that every day we stumble multiple times. Yet we know that we receive forgiveness every time we seek it from our Heavenly Father, no matter how many times or how hard we fall. God's mercy endures forever. As such, each day we are in a constant state of conversion, always seeking to live more faithfully so our actions match the faith we confess.

May we, in humility, recognize how often we imitate the first son whose promises are not matched by his actions. Then, may we rejoice that our Father in heaven calls us in love to return to Him daily like the second son, that He may forgive us, restore us and draw us closer to living the faithfulness we seek.

Fr. Wagner is Arlington Bishop Michael F. Burbidge's secretary.