

THE PARABLE OF TWO SONS: WHAT IT TAKES TO ENTER THE KINGDOM MATHEW 21:28–32

Introduction

The words “what do you think?” tie this parable to the Jewish leaders who had just confronted Christ and tried to discredit Him. The Lord wanted to convey a critical message to them, a message that would determine their eternal destiny.

What does it take to enter God’s Kingdom? Not only profession and righteousness, but also repentance and belief.

- I. The parable: a man and two sons (vv. 28-31).
- II. The point: sinners enter the kingdom before religionists (the self-righteous and those who make a false profession) (v. 31).
- III. The reason: religionists do not believe John — that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 32).

I. *Mathew 21:28–31 Parable: Work and Service*

The parable is simple and clear. It concerns a man who had two sons. Note several facts.

1. The command “go and work” is an emphatic imperative. The father meant what he said: “You go! You work!” There is no other choice in the father’s mind; no other alternative. The sons were to work and serve their father.
2. Note the word “today.” Today is the day to go. Today is the day to work, not tomorrow. Tomorrow may be too late. The harvest will rot in the field. The night will come when no man can work (Jn. 9:4). The sons could also die (Heb. 9:27). They had to go today while they had a chance to help their father.

2 Cor 6:2 For he says, “In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.

Psa 95:7-8 For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert.

3. The first son said, “*I will not.*” This was disrespectful rebellion. It was the refusal of a son who wished to go his own way in life, who rebelled at being told what to do. He was selfish, worldly, carnal, fleshly, materialistic, and prideful. He would have his own way and do his own thing regardless. However, note that the first son *later changed his mind and went*. The word *change* means to repent, to turn. (See *Repent*, Acts 17:29-30.) The first son changed and turned from his self-chosen life of rebellion and worldliness — turned back to his father and went into his father’s vineyard to work. He did exactly what his father commanded him to do.
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4. The second son said “*I will, sir.*” Note: his response indicates that he will go immediately and serve zealously in the father’s work. He said I go to work *for you*. But he failed; he *never* did go to work for his father. He went to work, but not for his father. He was just like the first son: selfish, disregarding the father and his needs. He went about his own life, living and working for *himself*. The only difference between the two sons is that the second son *professed* respect for the father and *professed* to work for the father, but he *never* went into the father’s vineyard. He never did the father’s work. (This implies that what he did day by day was his own work, his own labour. He worked and lived as he wished, disregarding the father entirely. It was a life of religion and moral strictness as we shall see.)
5. Christ asked the religionists standing around which of the two sons did the father’s will. The religionists did not see the point of the parable yet, so they gave the obvious answer: the first son did the father’s will.

Their immediate response to Christ is interesting. They demonstrated just how much religion and self-righteousness can blind a person, giving a sense of false security. A person, clergyman and layman alike, who sincerely lives a life of religion and moral purity has great difficulty understanding why he is not acceptable to God and cannot enter God’s kingdom.

ACTS 17:29–30 REPENTANCE

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Acts 17:29-30

Repentance means to change; to turn; to change one’s mind; to turn one’s life. It is a turning away from sin and turning toward God. It is a change of mind, a forsaking of sin. It is putting sin out of one’s thoughts and behaviour. It is resolving never to think or do a thing again. (See Mt. 3:2; Lk. 13:2-3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 26:20.) The change is turning away from lying, stealing, cheating, immorality, cursing, drunkenness, and the other so-called *glaring sins of the sinful nature*. But the change is also turning away from the *silent sins of the spirit* such as self-centredness, selfishness, envy, bitterness, pride, anger, covetousness, evil thoughts, hopelessness, laziness, jealousy, lust.

1. Repentance involves two turns. There is a negative turn away from sin and a positive turn toward God. It is a turning to God and away from sin, whether sins of thought or action.

2. Repentance is more than sorrow. Sorrow may or may not be involved in repentance. A person may repent simply because he wills and acts to change; or a person may repent because he senses an agonizing sorrow within. But the sense or feeling of sorrow is not repentance. Repentance is both the change of mind and the actual turning of one's life away from sin and toward God. □

II. *Mathew 21:31 Salvation: Sinners Enter First*

Jesus gave the point of the parable. Sinners enter the kingdom before religionists (the self-righteous and professors only). Note what Jesus did.

1. Jesus identified the man and the two sons in the parable.
 - a. The man who owned the vineyard was God. God is the Person who possesses the kingdom.
 - b. The first son represents the non-religious and worldly of this earth. These do not profess religion, and they do not know they are lost. They desire to go their own way, wanting nothing to do with God. The tax collectors represented the rejected and worldly-minded, those more interested in money and in the things of this world than in God. The prostitutes represented the immoral and sensual, those more interested in pleasure than God.
 - c. The second son represents the religious of this earth (the self-righteous and those who make a false profession). These were either reared in church from earliest childhood or else came into the church sometime in later life. They professed religion and righteousness to be the way a person should live.
2. Jesus identified the vineyard and work that was to be done. The vineyard is the Kingdom of God and the work is “entering the kingdom of God” — serve God within His kingdom. Note two things:
 - a. Both sons (all men) receive the same command and obligation: “Go into the vineyard.”
 - b. God respects both sons. He does not force either son to work, neither the son who rebels nor the son who makes a commitment but fails to work in God's vineyard. The sons' wills are honoured. They may go and work wherever they wish.
3. Jesus clearly stressed the point of the parable.
 - a. He said emphatically “I tell you the truth.” The word “I” means the Messiah, the Son of God Himself. The Messiah is revealing a critical truth.
 - b. He said in unmistakable terms: sinners “are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,” before the self-righteous and false religionist and false professor. It is important to pay close attention to the Lord's words. He said, “ahead of you.” He was not

shutting the door of heaven to the religionists. They just could not enter as they presently were. As Christ said in the next verse, they lacked one thing, and they must do that thing in order to enter God's kingdom.

4. Jesus shocked His audience. He declared that man's idea of religion is wrong. Religion and righteousness are not enough to enter God's kingdom. It takes more. Religion is not enough (worship services, ceremony, ritual, profession and ordinance). Righteousness is not enough (morality, virtue, law, rules and regulations, good works and commitment). Christ shockingly declared to the religionist and to the righteous: "Sinners are entering the kingdom *ahead of you*. What you have is not enough; it takes more. Something else is needed."

Mat 5:20 *"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Rom 10:3 *Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*

1 Cor 15:34 *Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God — I say this to your shame.*

III. **Mathew 21:32 Salvation: Rejection by Religionists**

The reason sinners enter God's kingdom and religionists do not is clearly stated: religionists do not believe John's message that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Note that Christ said three things.

1. John was righteous. John came "to show you the way of righteousness," the very righteousness that religionists say is necessary to live for God. John was godly and lived just like religionists said he should live, yet religionists did not believe John; that is, they did not believe his ministry and witness — that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

Christ said to the religionists standing around Him: "You are contradictory. John came to show you 'the way of righteousness' which you profess. He was godly, yet you did not receive his ministry and witness":

John 1:29 *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

John 1:34 *"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."*

Luke 7:30 *But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by him (John).*

Thought 1. The great tragedy of religionists is this: they stand aloof. They reject the counsel of God; they do not go and work in His vineyard.

2. Sinners believed John's witness: "The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him." The first son did exactly what John said to do: he repented of his loose life and believed that Jesus was the Son of God (Note, Mt. 21:31).
3. Religionists saw the evidence, but they rejected it. They saw the evidence of John's righteousness and of the changed lives of sinners ("even after you saw this"). But the religionists still denied the facts. Note: a religionist commits two gross errors that are seen in this passage.
 - a. The religionist lives a strict religious life, but he does not repent of coming short. He tells God he will *go and work in His vineyard*, that is, *His kingdom*, but he does not go into *God's vineyard*. However, note: he does work. In fact, he is very strict in his work, but he works in the vineyard of his own *religion* and righteousness and rules. He never enters God's vineyard (kingdom) to serve the Father.

What happened is what Jesus said. The religionists rejected the Scriptural witness which began with John's ministry and witness. This witness said that the only way to get into God's vineyard is through faith in Christ, and the only way to serve God adequately is through the indwelling power of Christ (Jn. 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5).

John 15:5 *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*

Eph 3:20 *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*

- b. The religionist does not believe John's personal witness: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. The religionist most likely accepts Jesus as a great teacher, but not as the Lamb of God who sacrificed Himself for the sins of the world (1 Pet. 2:24).

John 10:18 *"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."*

1 Pet 2:24 *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

1 Pet 3:18 *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.*

Thought 1. John's witness is the standard by which Jesus is measuring religionists. It is not enough to be religious and righteous, that is, a good, moral, outstanding citizen. A person has to do more.

- (1) He has to repent for not going into *God's vineyard* or *God's kingdom*. The religionist created his own vineyard of religion and righteousness, but his vineyard was not *God's vineyard*. *God's vineyard* is the vineyard of faith.

(2) He has to believe in God's Son, Jesus Christ. He has to enter the vineyard of faith, and he has to work within the vineyard of faith.

***Eph 2:8-10** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. ■*