

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Every once in a while someone tells me that I'm closer to God than they are, that my prayers are going to get further with God than their prayers. When I ask "Why do you think so?", they answer, "Because you're a pastor!" And at first I'm not quite sure what they are trying to say. Don't they know that we are all sinners and that everyone who sins is equally damned under the law? Or are they perhaps trying to tell me that they currently allow themselves to engage in behaviors they know are wrong, and God is not listening to their prayers because they are not willing to change? Or have they perhaps never really understood that when Jesus died on the cross, he paid for all sins of all sinners, giving them full access to the Lord through faith? This is an example of how you can't always tell what's going on in a person's heart.

The father in Jesus' parable must have felt that way. He wanted both of his sons to go and work in his vineyard. And each son did the opposite of what he said he would do. You can't always tell what's going on in a person's heart.

It helps to understand who Jesus told this parable to and when. It was Holy Week. Jesus had already ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey. That was on Sunday. On Monday he cleared out of the Temple those who had turned God's house into a market place instead of a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17). Now it was

Tuesday, and Jesus spent much of the day teaching in the Temple. Now it was much easier to teach without all those animals and vendors stinking up the place.

The chief priests, the ones authorized to administrate the Temple, weren't too happy with Jesus for chasing away the vendors. So they challenged him. "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" Jesus, Master Teacher, saw an opportunity to reach out to the chief priests and elders with the gospel. So he said, "I'll answer your question if you'll answer mine. Was John's baptism authorized by heaven or by man?" If they would acknowledge that John the Baptizer was a true prophet of God, then they could also acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. But unbelief is stubborn. It will not bend. The chief priests conferred with each other and agreed to lie: "We don't know who authorized John to preach and baptize," they answered Jesus (see Matthew 21:23-27).

In spite of their obstinate unbelief, Jesus still loved them enough to try another approach. What a good example he is to us! If you are trying to reach out to one of your relatives or acquaintances with the gospel, or if you're trying to reconcile with a fellow believer, if one approach doesn't work, try another approach: pray for them, make a meal for them, go on vacation with them, write out your ideas and send them a copy, tell them a parable. It's not too late to try until they die or Jesus comes back.

In today's Gospel we see Jesus taking another approach. <sup>28</sup>*“What do you think? [Jesus asked them.] There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup>‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.* Are you ever this son? Do you ever catch yourself telling God, “I will not”? I will not stop looking lustfully at others. I will not get my spending or my eating or my working or my hobbies under control. I will not stop fretting and being anxious about things. I will not stop taking things that don't belong to me. I will not honor my parents, my teachers, my pastor, the police, the governor, the president, or others in authority.” Are you ever this “I-will-not” son? \*What is it that gets you to think about your actions long enough to reverse course? Do you say, “Oh, my! I just disrespected God! I just got in the face of the Almighty! Oh, this is not good. He really ought to have fried me by now. But he hasn't. He must still love me in Jesus. It's time to make a change in my behavior.”

What is it that gets you to change your mind? Charles Colson of Watergate fame and Jack Eckerd of Eckerd Drug stores got together because they both believed that criminals should have to make restitution. They got on Jack Eckerd's Lear jet and went around the State of Florida advocating reforms. And everywhere they went Jack Eckerd would introduce Colson to the crowds by saying,

“This is Chuck Colson, my friend; I met him on Bill Buckley's television program. He's born again, I'm not. I wish I were.” And then he'd sit down. Later on the airplane Chuck would tell him about Jesus. They'd get off at the next stop. Eckerd would introduce Colson the same way, and Chuck would tell Jack more about Jesus on the next flight. He sent Jack Christian books to read. About a year went by with Chuck keeping up Christian contact with Jack. And eventually one day Jack became convinced that Jesus was, in fact, resurrected from the dead. He called up Chuck to tell him he believed. Chuck said, “You're born again!” Jack said, “No, I'm not. I haven't felt anything.” Chuck said, “Yes, you are!” After they talked more and prayed, Jack was convinced. “Marvelous!” he said. \*Shortly after that, Jack Eckerd was walking through one of his drugstores. He passed by the magazine rack where Playboy and Penthouse were displayed. He'd seen the pornography there many times, but it never bothered him. Now he saw them with new eyes. He'd had a Christian change of mind. He went back to his office, called in his president, and said, “Take Playboy and Penthouse out of my stores.” The president said, “You can't mean that, Mr. Eckerd. We make three million dollars a year on those items.” He said, “Take 'em out of my stores.” [James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) pp. 46-48, *alt.*] What gets you to change your mind about sin? I hope it's especially that the Holy Spirit reminds

you how much God loves you in Jesus.  
“Holy Spirit, always change our hearts to walk the ways of the Lord.”

<sup>30</sup>*Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing[: ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard’]. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.* Are you ever this son? Do you ever catch yourself respectfully telling God, “I will”? Isn’t that what you say to God every time we speak the confession of sins together? Ah, but “Forgive me, Lord” can never mean, “Make things right between us so I can go back and sin some more.” We all understand, don’t we, that when we say, “Have mercy on me, a sinner,” we mean, “I’m going to do my very best not to sin again,” right? Or do we just go through the motions, “Yeah, yeah, I’m a sinner. Whatever.” If we confess our sins but don’t mean it, we are indeed the son who answered, “*I will, sir,*” but did not do what his father had said. Or if we take our confirmation vows but then stop making time for God’s Word, we are this second son.

<sup>31</sup>*Which of the two [sons] did what his father wanted?” [Jesus asked.] “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”*

I am amazed that the chief priests and elders could be so blessed as to hear John the Baptizer preach, and not repent. I am amazed that the chief priests and elders could be so blessed as to hear Jesus, the Son of God himself, preach and not repent. Do you see how strong unbelief can be? Can you find those places in your heart where unbelief has latched itself on to you like a tick and stubbornly refuses to vacate the premises? There’s a little of the chief priests hiding in the hearts of all God’s people today, mine included. When you hear that some convicted murderers or rapists or child molesters have been brought to faith in Jesus, isn’t there a little part of you that hopes they are just faking repentance so that on Judgment Day the Lord can still fry them? That’s how the chief priests and elders felt about the tax collectors and prostitutes. “They are so bad that it isn’t even worth trying to share God’s Word with them.” \*But when God’s Word was shared with the tax collectors and prostitutes, some of them put their faith in Jesus! And when God’s Word was shared with you, you trusted in Jesus! That’s a miracle! Yet is there anyone here who has never exhibited some sinful stubbornness? We’ve all had our days where we would not yield when yielding was exactly what would have best honored Jesus or served to help spread the good news. See? We are all capable of stubborn unbelief. Yet here we are, listening to God’s Word, believing in God’s Son, looking for

God's blessing. Amazing!

Don't be surprised, dear friends, if someday you find yourself resisting God's will, saying to God in one moment, "*I will, sir,*" but a while later not following through and taking the actions necessary to change. If the internet is bringing entertainment into your home which you shouldn't watch, you could spend less time in front of a screen and read a good book instead—or The Good Book. If you're having trouble talking nice to those in your life, you could involve a trusted Christian friend to help you. If you are infected with the road-rage virus, you could spend more time in your Bible and then study anger management techniques. It's amazing what the Holy Spirit can do in the hearts of God's people. Let's never say to God, "*I will, sir,*" and then fail to do the will of the Father.

"But, Pastor, you just don't understand how hard it is to change." Oh? Why? Because I'm a pastor? Because I'm "closer to God?" Come on, I'm a sinner just like you, struggling to humble myself and control my anxiety and anger and fight against Satan wherever he attacks me. Christian change is hard for us all. Sometimes you've got to get down on your belly and crawl as if your life depended on it.

Here's what I mean. Many years ago the top of a mine shaft fell in while a considerable number of the miners were

still working below. Their way up was completely blocked. Those who were in the mine gathered to a spot where the last remains of air could be breathed. There they sat and sang and prayed without even a candle. They were in total darkness. But then one of them said he had heard that there was a connection between that pit and an old pit nearby which had been worked years before. He said it was a long passage through which a man might pass by crawling all the way, lying flat on the ground. The passage was very long, but they crept through it, and at last they came out to the bottom of the other shaft, and their lives were saved. | If your access straight up to Christ is blocked up by your stubborn refusal to change those few things that still need work in your heart, there is another path, the old-fashioned way by which many sinners have gone, the same path by which thieves and whores have gone. Creep along it, lowly and humbly. Go flat on your belly. [Adapted from Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Quotable Spurgeon*, (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, Inc, 1990)] This same Jesus who would not give up on those stubborn chief priests is still holding out his arms to us. He's actually hoping that we will become like the third son in the parable. "The third son?" Uh-huh. The one who, when his father said, "You also go and work in my vineyard," responded, "Yes, sir, I will," and then went. That's the kind of child our heavenly Father is looking for. And by his grace, with help from his Holy Spirit, we will give our loving Father just what he wants.