

**Proper 21 (A)**  
Pastor Ed Harkey

Matthew 21: (23-27), 28-32  
TLC, Keene, NH

### *A Different Kind of Child*

*“What do you think? A man had two sons ...”*

*“Thus says the Lord, ‘Israel is My firstborn son and I say to you “Let My son go that he may serve Me.”” [Exodus 4:22, 23]*

*“Let no one then among those who live in vice despair; let no one who lives in virtue slumber.” [Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew, 67]*

### **Introduction**

Just recently I came upon this snippet of a conversation between God and a parishioner who had a bit of a beef with preachers. It went like this:

“God, why do some of your preachers feel the need to scream and shout? I can hear just fine.”

God: “PROVE IT.” [Bob Miller, “Conversations with God,” in *CPR*, 3:4, 25]

It is a thought reflected throughout Scriptures, for e.g. James:

*“Be doers of the Word and not just hearers only.” [1:22]*

Or the beloved apostle John:

*“Little children, let us **not** love in word or talk [only] but in deed and truth. By this we know that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” [1 John 3:18, 16]*

**Main Thought:** Let the baptized and redeemed of Jesus rejoice in the gift of their salvation, and in turn, respond eagerly to the Father’s invitation to work diligently in vineyard of the Lord.

[Loosely adapted from Hartwig, *CPR*, 3:4, 23]

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE MAKES US CHILDREN OF GRACE, WHO,  
IN TURN, BY GRACE WORK GRACE IN OUR FATHER’S WORLD.

Amen.

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## CONTEXT:

It's Tuesday of Holy Week, a couple of days after Jesus entered into Jerusalem to the delight of the disciples as well as the cries of acclamation from the crowds. Jesus has caused somewhat of a stir from the day before, when He overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Now He is back in His city, face-to-face with the religious establishment. *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”* they inquire of the Son of God.

<sup>24</sup> Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question ... <sup>25</sup> The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?... <sup>27</sup> They answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

“The outline of the [first part of today's] passage is simple,” says Myron Augsburger in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel: “(1) the question, (2) the counterquestion, and (3) the draw!”

That is ... until Jesus, in the Spirit, compels a response to Him:

<sup>28</sup> **“What do you** [of the religious establishment] **think? A man** [read, the heavenly Father] **had two sons** [children - “an affectionate term that Jesus applies to his own followers ... and that the apostles apply to their beloved children in the Lord”<sup>1</sup>]. **And he went to the first** [NB the direction ... the Gospel of grace comes to us, long before we come to it] **and said, ‘Son [child], go and work in the vineyard** [“Israel – God's own possession”<sup>2</sup>] **today.’”**

“Go and work” – reminding us that “saving faith is a fruitful faith.” [Hartwig, 23] Ever living, acting, breathing, doing!

<sup>29</sup> **And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he** [like one of two thieves] **changed his mind** [“regretted”<sup>3</sup>] **and went.**

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<sup>1</sup> τέκνα is gender neutral; Matthew 9:2; Mark 10:24; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Galatians 4:19; 1 John 2:18; 3:7, 18; 4:4 [Hartwig, *CPR*, 3:4, 23]

<sup>2</sup> Scharlemann, *Proclaiming the Parables*, 58

<sup>3</sup> μεταμελομαι - carrying similar force as μετανοια but not as strong

## CHILD #1

Jesus Himself identifies who these are who first say “No,” but then in repentance say “Yes” to the gracious invitation of God. They are the “*am ha-arez*, the despised ‘people of the land,’ ... the Great Unwashed.” [Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:764]

They are ones who, in their sin, initially say “No” to what God offers in His Son. But after He dines and eats with them ... after He cleanses, heals and forgives them ... after He even raises their dead, they have a change of heart. They come to distrust themselves, says Augustine, coming to such a faith that says:

*“Diffidam mihi, fidam in te. I will distrust myself, I will trust in You.”*

It might be like one of our high school or college students, faced with a dilemma. It’s been a rough semester. There’s no way they have time to prepare for all of their finals. So they make a decision ... they tuck away some cheat notes in their folder, so that when the teacher isn’t looking, they’ll pull them out.

But then class starts, and they have a change of heart. Where, instead, they say a silent prayer to the Lord, asking for His wisdom. The test is placed before them. Their conscience is clear.

Wherein, by grace and the Holy Spirit helping us, could this be us? Or any who would despise the Lord’s gifts, or try and will themselves into the kingdom ... justifying how good we are, excusing our sin, presuming on God’s grace. But then ... a change of heart. Instead of trying to hide who we are, we lay ourselves bare before the throne of God, and our sin, before the cross of Christ. We join the rank and file of tax collectors and thieves – sinners – who presume nothing, but fall upon the mercy of God.

But there is a second child ... also, at times, like us.

## CHILD #2

**<sup>30</sup> And he went** [again, the Gospel of grace is one way] **to the other son** [later identified as the self-righteous] **and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir** [κυριε, respectfully, my Lord],’ **but did not go.**

Here, it is:

*“Fidam in meipsum, diffidam tibi. I will trust myself, I will distrust You.”*

This, too, is us. Wherein, our heavenly Father bids us forth into the world, to live out our lives of faith as His disciples. “Be my Son.” He says. “Be my daughter.” Bidding us to be the mirror image of Jesus – at home, at work, at play.

“And we say, ‘Yes, Lord, I’ll do as you ask.’”

But just minutes after leaving God’s house, husbands and wives are fighting, or our own thoughts race to fill sinful desires. Once again, hateful thoughts return about our brother or sister across the aisle. [Adapted from Grimenstein, *CPR*, 15:4, 28] Yes, this, too, is us, alright – “second sons, elder brothers, respectable Pharisees” that we are.<sup>4</sup>

But enter yet another CHILD/SON #3 ... THE SON OF GOD

Who does more than promise, but who out of love decides to act:

*“‘Yes, Lord, I will go and work.’ And the child did so.”*

Where, we are given to overhear a conversation, as one of my colleagues in ministry Ed Grimenstein has done, between the Father and Jesus. Where, sometime in eternity, God the Father spoke to His Son and said:

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<sup>4</sup> “We are resentful at being the butts of the divine joke of grace that says nothing matters except plain, old, de facto, yes-Jesus faith. And when we institutionalize that resentment by giving the impression that the church is not for sinners and gainsayers, we are a disgrace to the Gospel – a bushel of works hiding the Light of the world.” [Capon, *The Parables of Judgment*, 109]

“Son, I love you. But I have a difficult mission. I need you to go to work today ... I need you to take on flesh and blood. I need you to enter time ... to breathe, dwell and eat with sinful people. I need you to heal, preach, and teach.

“But then, I need you to do one thing more. It won’t be easy. It’s going to involve betrayal, ridicule, and scorn. It’s going to involve great agony ... even death. I’m sorry to ask this of you – but I need you to die in their place. Will you do this for me? Will you do this for them?” [Adapted from Grimenstein, 28]

Of course, we know the answer, still resounding and reverberating among the rafters of heaven: “Yes, Father, I will do it.” As He surely would, “*in perfect obedience.*” Wrestling to the point of sweating blood. Holding nothing back. Giving no hint of quitting. He not only said “Yes” to His Father, but then went to work, becoming obedient to death ... even death on a cross.

Who invites you and me, even now, “Remember what I did for you. I am, and will be, your strength. My body and blood will strengthen you; the new life I’ve poured over you in Baptism will refresh you.” [Grimenstein, 28] So that what arises from the depths of His pool of grace ... from the waters of Baptism, clothed in the robes of royalty is ...

CHILD # 4 [You & Me]

***Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.***

“What an honor that God should address us as sons [and daughters]! What a stimulus to us to be [His children] indeed and show ourselves as [such]!” [Lenski, *The Eisenach Gospel Selection*, 2:94]

NB again, grace’s offering. We get to go in. Where, even those who may be saying “No” right now, the door is open for them to come in too. Jesus, in His mercy, would exclude no one. Not even you. Not even me.

Where we, by His grace, through faith, get to join Him in the vineyard ... with a service that is not marked by zeal alone, or by doing alone, but by believing in Him! In wanting to please Him!

Like Zacchaeus, who said, "I will, sir," and then proceeded to make right what he had done wrong: "*Behold, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it four-fold.*"

Like the woman caught in adultery. Wherein, Jesus' instruction of "*Go and sin no more,*" changed her life forever.

Like you and me, who arising from the waters of Baptism, being reaffirmed of our status as children upon hearing that our sins are forgiven, while walking away from the Master's Table, get to see the "*work of God*" being accomplished in us. Where, now, with such gifts ringing in our ears, we get "*to do the will of our Father who is in heaven.*"

### **Conclusion**

LUTHER: "Oh, it is a living, busy, active and mighty thing this faith; it cannot be but ever doing good. Faith does not ask if there are good works to be done, but has done them before one can ask, and it is ever doing [them]."

"Today, again, the Father calls us into his service ... He holds before us his grace and mercy and invites us to repent and believe. He holds before us his Son, who was nailed to the cross along with our sins, resulting in our redemption. ... Now the Father addresses each of us, 'Child, go and work today in my vineyard.' Prompted by God's grace and empowered by his Spirit through his Word, we respond, 'I will, Lord!' and then ... go eagerly to work - a child of the third kind." [Hartwig, 25]

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*Amen.*