

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

Matthew 21:28-32

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Many Christians are familiar with this verse in James 1:22. 'Don't just listen. Do it.' It summarizes well the parable that we are going to study today. In the Parable of the Two Sons, the Lord Jesus teaches that the person who refuses to do what is asked of him but who subsequently changes his mind and does the task is better than the one who promises to take care of his obligations but then fails to keep his word. Let's read this parable. Matthew 21:28-32.

Matthew 21:28. "What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

29 And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went.

30 And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.

31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.

The story is simple and clear. It concerns a man who owned a vineyard. He had two sons. He approached his two sons and told them to go and work in the vineyard that particular day. The command 'go and work' is an emphatic imperative. The sons were to work for their father. They were not given a choice.

'No, I will not'

The first son said, *I will not*. This blunt answer indicated outright rebellion against the father's authority. Culturally this was unacceptable since obedience would have been the only proper response of a son. Later however, he *repented and went* to the vineyard to work.

There are two words in Greek for 'repent.' The first one is the word *metanoeo* which means regret and forsaking the evil by a change of heart. This is the word that is associated with salvation (Matthew 4:17: **Repent** (*metanoeo*), *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*). The repentance expressed by the son here is a different word. It is the word *metamelomai*. It indicates a strong reaction of displeasure, a certain disgust with one self. The son was disgusted with himself that he had talked or behaved like that with his father.

This word, *metamelomai*, has one big difference from the other word for 'repent.' And it is that this strong feeling of regret does not necessarily lead to the right action. For example, *metamelomai* is the word used of Judas to describe the sense of bitter regret that he had betrayed the Lord Jesus. Matthew 27:3: *When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented (metamelomai) and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.* In other translation, we have, *he was remorseful.* Judas felt so bitter with himself that he eventually committed suicide. So the strong feeling of regret may or may not lead to the right action. In the case of Judas, it did not lead to the right action. In the case of the son in the parable, it did. He eventually obeyed his father and went to work.

'Yes, I will'

The second son responded quite differently. He said, *I go, sir.* It is surprising that a son addresses his father as 'sir'. He was so respectful, so polite, so apparently obedient. Calling his father by 'sir' strengthened the apparent agreement to obey. 'Yes, sir. Right away!' But it ended there. *He did not go to work in the vineyard.* Perhaps, he never had the intention of honoring his promise.

Then Jesus asked His listeners, the chief priests and the elders (v. 23), which son had done 'the will of the father.' Is it the one whose 'no' became a 'yes', or the one whose 'yes' became a 'no'?

In this short story, Jesus highlighted the fact that doing the will of the father is more than simply a matter of words. It is primarily a matter of deeds. It is one thing to say one will do the will of the father; it is another thing actually to do it. Words alone mean nothing. And so, the religious leaders gave the obvious answer. They said that the obedient son is the one who went to the vineyard, not the one who said 'yes' but did not go.

That was the correct answer. But they must have been shocked and offended by the application Jesus proceeded to draw from the parable. *Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.* Jesus linked them, the religious authorities, with the son who seemed so ready to work but decided not to go. They accepted the law of God and did everything possible to show their compliance to it. Yet they had not obeyed it, nor did they obey the messengers God had sent them. On the other hand, the sinful outcasts of society, 'the tax collectors and the harlots,' are identified with the son who first refused to obey his father but afterwards changed his mind and did so. They will be in the kingdom.

Exclusion from the kingdom

Jesus spoke not only of their entering God's kingdom but also going there first, before the chief priests and the elders. The 'sinners' will enter the kingdom ahead of the religious people! This was as radical as Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 8:11-12 where the Lord spoke of Gentiles coming into the kingdom of God to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while the 'sons of the kingdom' will find themselves outside. Matthew 8:11-12: *And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness.* I can imagine the religious leaders fuming when they heard Jesus' explanation of the parable.

This phrase, *the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you*, also raises the issue of how much is implied by the words 'go before.' In Greek, it is one word, *proago*. *Proago* means, at least, a reversal. Those who appeared to be first are in reality last; and those who appeared to be last, are first. But does this 'go before' mean that the religious leaders will also go into the kingdom, only they will go behind the others and go less honorably? I don't think so. Not to be there first does not imply that one will necessarily get there one day. Remember the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-12). Those who go in first enjoyed the wedding feast. But the door is shut

before the others get there. In the parable of the Two Sons, the Lord's saying implies an exclusion, not merely a demotion. Those who 'get there first' take the place of those who had been expected to be there.

So Jesus was saying, 'The tax collectors and the prostitutes will go into the kingdom of God before you, but you may not enter. You will enter only if you, like them, like the good son, change your mind and respond to the preaching of righteousness.'

Then in v. 32, Jesus provided the logic underlying His explanation of the parable. *For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.*

John came to show people how to live according to God's will. Those who believed him repented and were baptized. They included the least-respected members of Jewish society, the tax collectors and the harlots, for whom repentance was an obvious need. Their enthusiastic response should have caused the religious leaders to do the same, to repent and to believe John. But they did not. They rejected John's call. And if they refused John's call, it is clear that they will also refuse that of Jesus. Therefore they will not enter the kingdom of God. The kingdom is not for them.

Responding to God's call

I just mentioned that God had provided an invitation to the people in the preaching of John the Baptist. Some responded positively to it; others rejected it. In many ways, this parable has to do with God's call, God's invitation to us. What constitutes this call? The call, in the Scripture, takes place when God's word comes to you. Even now as you are reading or listening to this lesson, as you hear the word of God being taught, you are being called. If you are not a Christian, know that God's word is addressing you and calling you at this very moment.

Why do we say that God's word itself constitutes a call? Because God's word always requires a response, a response that changes everything in a person's life. When the word of God came to Isaiah in Isaiah 6, it was a call to be a prophet. *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* (Isaiah 6:8). That call demanded a response from Isaiah that affected his whole life. Notice that many prophetic books begin in this way: 'The word of the Lord came to so and so, to Hosea (1:1), to Joel (1:1), to Micah (1:1), to Zephaniah (1:1)...' The word of God addressed them specifically. These men became prophets because the word of God came to them and they responded to that word. This is also how, in the NT, we become a Christian, i.e., when the word of God comes to you and you respond positively to it. If you reject it, then you have said 'no' to God and shut yourself off from the kingdom of God.

Another thing to notice about God's call is that it is a call to serve. In the parable, the father came to the sons and said, *Go and work in the vineyard today*. The vineyard is of course the symbol of the kingdom of God. Go and serve God within His kingdom. So God's call to us to become Christians is never a call by which you simply raise your hand and you profess to be a Christian. That is not Christianity. The Christian is called to action. Every Christian is commissioned to accomplish a task. Go and work in the vineyard.

And the third point to emphasize is that it is not just a question of hearing God's call. It is not even just responding by saying 'yes' or 'no' to God's call. It is first and foremost a question of doing it, of doing God's will. Doing the will of God actually means getting into the substance of what it means to serve God.

According to the parable, the religious leaders did not do the will of God since they are identified with the son who said he would go to the vineyard but then did not go. I wonder if you have ever asked yourself this question. The religious leaders, did they think that they were not doing God's

will? Did they say to God 'Yes, Sir,' but they did not really mean to do God's will, they had no intention to obey His word? In other words, were they willfully disobedient? I don't think so. I think they wanted to do God's will. In fact, they were sure to enter the kingdom precisely because they felt they were zealously obedient.

When you study the life of the Pharisees for example you discover that they certainly did not lack sincerity in their commitment. They tried very hard to live in obedience to God's law. They were so concerned about obeying God's law that they kept themselves strictly apart from those who were not doing it. Yet Jesus compared them to the son who did not do the will of his father. If their failure was not in terms of religious sincerity, then something else must be the reason for their disobedience. What is it?

We can put the question in this way: How can we say 'yes' to God, but this 'yes' turns out to be a 'no'? How can we agree to serve God and yet disobey Him?

A 'yes' becomes a 'no'

'Yes, sir,' the son said. The word translated 'sir' here is *kyrie*, 'lord'. It shimmers with extra meaning in this parable. It is the same title that we find in Matthew 7:21 where Jesus said, "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 'Lord, Lord.'*" 'Sir, Sir.' *Kyrie, Kyrie*. It is not enough just to say 'Yes, Sir.' In order to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must do the will of the Father. Does that remind you of something? Yes, that is exactly the point that Jesus was making in the Parable of the Two Sons. 'Which son obeyed the father,' Jesus asked. It is the one who said 'no' but changed his mind and went to work. He eventually obeyed. He did the work. He symbolizes the tax collectors and the prostitutes who repented and welcomed the preaching of John the Baptist. They are the ones who will enter into the kingdom of God.

Notice again that in Matthew 7, there is no suggestion of insincerity in saying 'Lord, Lord.' The problem is that their claim to discipleship did not match up to Jesus' criteria of obedience.

Let me repeat my question. How can a 'yes' to God turn out to be a 'no'? How can we sincerely agree to serve God and yet in actual life disobey Him? I would like to suggest two possibilities.

Firstly, a person might suppose that in saying 'yes' to God's word, he has already done it. For example, he feels that by saying 'yes' at a meeting, maybe it was an altar call or a call to serve the Lord, he has obeyed God. He thinks that his response is equivalent to doing His will. The Pharisees and the scribes might have thought that they have done God's will when they received the law and gave assent to it. The son in the parable may think that in saying 'yes', he has already pleased his father and nothing more really needs to be done. Whether he actually goes to the vineyard or not does not matter all that much, seeing that he has already pleased the father by saying 'yes'.

Secondly, a 'yes' can become a 'no' if a person says 'yes' with the understanding in his mind that he will serve God in his own way. 'Yes, I will do it, but I will do it my way.' Jesus wants disciples who will work under Him, i.e. over whom He can be Lord. We can profess faith in Christ and yet be indifferent or even hostile to keeping His commands where they pinch us. We decide to live the Christian life according to the parts of the Scriptures that we like. And we feel that we are pious. Jesus does not want this kind of disciple. In Matthew 7, this self-centeredness is seen in the high self-consciousness of people who sounded so religious. These people were too much aware of their piety. 'Lord, Lord,' they said. They were too much aware of their successful ministries. 'Didn't we perform many miracles and mighty works?' Their sense of devotion expressed in the double divine name and their sense of success seen in the review of their work indicate that they were too impressed with their work. They performed amazing religious deeds, but they were not Christ-centered deeds. 'I never

knew you; get away from Me,' Jesus told them. They believed that they knew Jesus, but they never gave Him a chance to know them because they were too preoccupied with themselves.

The fact that one can be sincere, do the right things and not be admitted into the kingdom at the judgment should be a serious warning to all of us. Sincere zeal for God and doing the will of God can be two very different things.

Go and come

You know, it is interesting to observe that for those to whom God says 'Go', and those who obey that 'go', God will say 'come'. We see this very thing in Matthew 25:34: *Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'* To those who go in obedience to God's will, to God's call, the Lord will say, 'Come, blessed of My Father. Take your inheritance. The kingdom is now yours.'

On the other hand, those to whom God says 'go', and they do not go, God will say 'go' to them a second and final time. Again, in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, Matthew 25:41: *Then he will say to those at his left hand, **Depart** from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 'Go away. Go into the eternal fire.'* That is the final 'go' of God. If you do not respond to God's first 'go' (His call to serve), then the second 'go' will be a final 'go' from God. That means, 'Go and don't come back again.'

Our response to God's call is the most important decision that we will make in this life. If we say 'yes', then we must understand the 'yes' in terms of going out every day and doing God's will, living the kind of life that glorifies God, and depending on His strength to do it.