

Wednesday in Oculi  
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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

## PARABLES OF LENT - THE TWO SONS

Matthew 13:44-46, Psalm 49

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

**T**he parable of the two sons, which you have just heard, is one of Jesus' more obvious parables, an easy one to figure out, right? The two sons are each commanded by their father to go work in his vineyard. One says he will not do so, but then goes and does it. And the other says he will do so, but then does not. So this is a parable about saying and doing. And the one who actually does, rather than the one who merely says he will do, is the one who does what his father commanded.

And the chief priests and elders of the Jews, to whom Jesus was speaking, get it. They rightly identify the one who actually did the will of the father. And so Jesus uses this parable to show them that it is not those who say the right things, like them, that are pleasing to God, but those who even though they are reluctant at first, actually do them. And he says: "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you." For the tax collectors and harlots of which Jesus speaks actually had begun to do the things God wanted them to do, while the seemingly pious and righteous gave God little more than lip service to appear righteous before men, without actually doing the chief works God had called them to do.

And so the meaning of the parable should be clear to us, that we are not only to follow God with our words, saying the right creed, praying the right prayers, and employing pious words with others, but are to actually do the works God would have us do. Actions should follow our words. And, apparently, it is more important to actually do the right things in the end than to say the right things. So those who say "deeds and not creeds" are right, right?

No. That's not Jesus point at all. The seemingly obvious explanation to the parable is not the right explanation; for this explanation does not take into account what Jesus says in applying this parable to the people. This is not a parable pitting creeds against deeds. It is a parable about faith, something which includes both belief or creed, and deeds, or way of life. To see this, one must look at Jesus' explanation of why tax collectors and harlots will get into the kingdom ahead of the Jewish priests and elders. He says: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him, and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."

John, our Lord says, came in the way of righteousness. So is John the one we look to to see the fulfillment of this parable? No, it's not that. He does not say that John is the Righteous One, but rather that John came in the way of righteousness, and this has to do with John's mission rather than his person. He was sent to prepare the way of the Righteous One, our Lord Jesus Christ. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," he preached. And those who did repent were then baptized by him in the Jordan. And many people considered terribly sinful, like tax collectors and harlots, listened to John. They repented of their sins and were baptized and believed on Christ whom John proclaimed to be the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This is what Jesus means by the phrase "the way of righteousness".

And this is the very thing He was teaching in the parable of the two sons. He was not setting up a dichotomy between believing and doing, but between merely claiming to believe and actually believing, between saying you listen to God and actually listening to Him, between stating that you are a Christian and actually being a Christian. And what is the work in the vineyard in this parable, the thing that actually fulfills the Father's will? That work is this: Repent of your sins. And believe on Christ Jesus for salvation. That is the primary work of the Christian, and from this thing, which is actually not a work, but a reception of God and His grace, all outward works of faith flow. This is the way of righteousness.

Our Lord, you see, leaves no room for the pride of the chief priests and elders, for the outwardly pious pride of one's own doings. What He seeks is humility - repentance and trust in Him who alone is the Righteous One, whose way John prepared.

Jesus alone is the one who both says and does perfectly, after all. "O Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" Jesus is the only one who is worthy to enter the kingdom of God, "who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart." It is as Luther put it in his great hymn "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice":

God said to His beloved Son:  
"It's time to have compassion.  
Then go, bright jewel of My crown,  
And bring to all salvation.  
From sin and sorrow set them free;  
Slay bitter death for them that they  
May live with You forever."

And what was the Son's response? Did He give mere lip service, or did He both say and do?

“The Son obeyed the Father’s will,  
Was born of virgin mother;  
And God’s good pleasure to fulfill,  
He came to be my brother..”

Jesus came down into the vineyard, so to speak, to pay the penalty for our sins with His own precious blood, to save us from our sins by the work of His passion and sacrifice, to rescue us who at His word both repent and believe. So this Lententide, let us not be like those Jews of old who heard but did not believe, who said they would do, but did not. But rather let us walk in the way of repentance and of faith, which is the way of righteousness, and the way of fellowship with Righteous One, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +

