

## “More Than Talk”

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and even after you saw it you did not change your minds and believe him.’”

This is a little story Jesus told. Plain and simple. But with kind of a gut punch to it. It’s about two sons. The father goes to the first son, and says, “I want you to work in the vineyard today.” “No way” the boy says. But later, he changes his mind, and goes. In the meantime, when #1 son said no, the dad goes to his other son, and says, “Go, work in the vineyard today.” “Yes, sir, I will,” the son chirps. But he never goes. “Which of these two sons did the will of their father?” Jesus asks.

Okay. Let’s do a little detective work, and look at the setting in which Jesus told this story, and why He told it. The overall setting for this story is the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders (the scribes, Pharisees, chief priests). They are rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, sent from God. In the section *before* this story, the chief priests and elders came to Jesus to try to trap Him with a question. “By what authority are you doing (what You do), and who gave you this authority?” (Matthew 21:23).

Jesus responds with a question of His own: Was John the Baptist’s ministry of God, or did he do this on his own? (verse 25). Well now, *they* were trapped. If they say John’s ministry is from God, Jesus will say, “Why didn’t you believe him then?” If they say John’s ministry is just from human origin, they’ll be afraid how the crowd would react, because most people believed John was a prophet from God.

According to Matthew, it’s *at this point* that Jesus tells the story of the 2 sons. The first says he won’t go work in the vineyard, but later he does. The other son said he would, but never went to work. Jesus comments on that: “‘Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you’” (Matthew 21:31). There is this incredible sentence from Jesus: “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Imagine that! Super religious men, religious leaders devoted to their religion. Hated tax collectors, prostitutes, are going into God’s kingdom ahead of them! Whew! Talk about a bombshell statement!

Why would Jesus say that? “For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and even after you saw it you did not change your minds and believe him” (Matthew 21:32).

The chief priests and scribes and Pharisees said all the right stuff, kept all the religious traditions,

but rejected John the Baptist's call to repent, and rejected the teachings and claims of Jesus. Meanwhile, outsiders like tax collectors and prostitutes were not part of the accepted religion, yet many of them believed the preaching of John the Baptist and the message and claims of Jesus.

You see how the story of the two sons highlights these 2 groups? The son who said he'd go work in the vineyard but never went represented who? *Religious leaders*. The son who said no at first, but then changed his mind represented who? *Tax collectors, prostitutes, those outside the religious circle*.

So, Jesus is sticking the knife in them, and twisting it – confronting their unbelief, and rejection of Him. And the parable that Jesus tells right after this, in Matthew 21, has basically the same point!

Okay. But what does all of that have to do with us today? *It's telling us that doing what God wants is more than talk, more than words. It's action.* Which of the two sons did what the father wanted? Not just the one who *said* he would, but the one who eventually *went and worked* in the vineyard.

*Real Christianity is more than talk!* There's a passage in 1 Corinthians that ties in with this. It says, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Corinthians 4:20).

Much of our Christian experience has to do with words and talk. Creeds and prayers that we recite (like the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer). Printed calls to worship and opening prayers in the bulletin. Liturgy for the communion service. Words to hymns and songs that we sing. Promises that we make when we join the church or have a baptism. These are important! These words represent a collective expression of (hopefully) an authentic spiritual experience, and an experience of God. It's kind of like we're saying with the son, "Yes, I'll go work in the vineyard!" I do. I believe. I promise.

And then there are sermons! 25, 30 minutes of *words* every Sunday! How many sermons have you heard in your lifetime? Maybe you're thinking, "I wish they had "Frequent Sermon Coupons" – that after listening to a certain amount of sermons, you could get some sort of reward. Maybe an excuse to miss some Sundays in church, or a gift card to Olive Garden or Texas Roadhouse. Some years ago I figured out that I had preached about 855 different sermons. It would be more now. More than 855 old sermons in the barrel, all of them "Golden Oldies"! That's a lot of words! A well-known preacher, at one point in his life, told how he looked over the sermons he had preached up to that point, and decided to throw them all out. He said the world was too noble a place for them! If the kingdom of God would come through the sheer number of sermons preached and heard, it would have come long ago!

Then there are Christian magazines. Christian books. Christian DVD's. *Words!*

A lot of what we do in the church is centered around words and talk! Discussion groups. Bible studies. Committee meetings. Seminars. Planning retreats.

What more can be said about how to live the Christian life, how to be a follower of Jesus? Words. Words. Words. But, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). Elsewhere, Jesus said, “Not every one who *says* to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of my Father in heaven.” It was the son who first said “no”, but later went to work in the vineyard, who did the will of his father. Jesus gives it to us straight, doesn’t He? *Talking* about the Christian life is not enough. *We have to live it!*

How much have you and I been changed by all the sermons we’ve heard (or preached!)? How differently do I live because of all the time I’ve spent in a Bible study, or Sunday School class, or a small group meeting? How much deeper is my faith because of all the Christian books I’ve read or DVD’s I’ve watched? Hopefully, we can answer these questions in a positive way. But the bottom line is:  
*Being a disciple and follower of Jesus involves more than talk – it’s action, doing!*

We can do a 6 or 8 week study on prayer, and still rarely pray. We can hear sermons on tithing, agree that it’s a good idea, and still not tithe. We can have classes on how to share our faith with others, but never talk with anyone about the Lord. We can attend a seminar on the gifts of the Spirit, and still not know what our gift or gifts are. Being a Christian is more than talk, it is action, doing.

*This whole discussion relates to churches also, not just individuals.* I’ve spent a good chunk of my life at church meetings! If the way you got to heaven was by spending a certain number of hours in church meetings, I think I will have made the cut! Looking back, so many of these church meetings where we would discuss the issues, ad nauseam – talk and talk and talk – and we’d leave the meeting, and basically nothing would be done as a result of all the conversation. I remember in one church, we had to make a decision whether to stay in our building (it was in within the city limits), or build a new church building on land that we owned outside the city. We had meeting after meeting after meeting. Finally, one of the church leaders said, “We have to make a decision. Even if it’s the wrong decision, let’s decide!”

The noted Bible scholar, William Barclay, in his commentary on this parable of Jesus about the 2 sons, writes this: “Jesus never said, ‘By their words ye shall know them.’ He said, ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ The world is full of talk about Christianity, but one deed is worth a thousand words. It is one thing to serve on a committee and talk; it is another thing to serve Christ and act.”

*So, here’s some good news! Jesus not only says we need to put our faith into action; He gives us the power to do it!* Again, 1 Corinthians 4:20: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.” 1 Thessalonians 1:5 also is a verse of promise: “For our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and the Holy Spirit.” The Apostle Paul, who wrote both of these Scripture passages, is saying that the gospel he preaches and teaches is not just a bunch of words, religious talk. But these words are backed up by powerful things happening through the Holy Spirit.

If you read about the early church, those first Christians, in the Book of Acts, you see this. Miracles are taking place. Lives are being changed. Christians are sharing their faith and the message of Jesus with an unbelieving world – even if it means being persecuted as a result. The Church had a concern for the practical needs of people, and was constantly reaching out in compassion to address those needs.

The Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus – living in us if we’re followers of Jesus – can empower us for action! Living the Christian life is not a matter of whipping up self-generated energy and enthusiasm, it’s surrendering ourselves to Christ, humbly allowing God’s Spirit to work in and through us.

I once saw a poster in a bank, a poster advertising the bank and its services. It said, “We just lost the lip service award.” *We just lost the lip service award!* See what they’re saying? They just don’t say things, promise things. No one will give them an award just for that. They deliver! That’s a good motto for Christians!

So, how can I apply this sermon in a practical way? Is there something I’ve promised God I would do, then never followed up on? Something I’m claiming to be, or do, but not living it? Some good intention – some self-improvement – but never actually started to do? Maybe to be more regular in church attendance. Maybe to pray more, or establish a daily devotional time. Maybe to start to tithe. Maybe to visit that person or call that person who you said to would. Maybe to come to the Bible studies when we have them.

As the Nike ad says: “Just do it!”

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*  
*Community United Methodist Church*  
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