

Holy Week

*“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”
(Matthew 21:31 ESV)*

The Parable Of The Two Sons

Palm Sunday

April 2nd, 2023

Matthew 21:28-32

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Introduction:

Good morning! This is Palm Sunday; it is the beginning of something that we call “Holy Week”. Holy Week encompasses Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Collectively these special days focus attention on the last week of Jesus’ life before his climactic death and resurrection on our behalf.

Very frequently the sermon time on Palm Sunday will be used to look at some of the events that happened in the city of Jerusalem leading up to Jesus’ rejection, betrayal and death upon the cross. Last year we looked at the Triumphal Entry when Jesus rode up the mountain to Jerusalem on a donkey, even the foal of a donkey. The year before that we looked at Psalm 118 which provides the song that the crowds sang to Jesus as he made this journey. We’ve also looked at the story of Jesus’ anointing at Bethany, his cleansing of the temple and the parable of the Wedding Banquet in recent years – but to the best of my recollection we have never looked at the Parable of the Two Sons as told by Matthew – and only Matthew – in Matthew 21 verses 28-32, so if you have your Bible, please open it now to that passage, that’s on page 826 in your pew Bibles.

While you find that, let me remind you of the basic timeline for Holy Week leading up to this story. On Sunday Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem – as I just mentioned, riding on a donkey. He rides in, takes a look around the temple complex and then leaves and goes back to Bethany

where he was staying. The next morning, on Monday, he goes back into the city – walking this time - and on the way he curses a fig tree because it was not bearing any figs. From there he went back into the temple and drove out all the money changers who were blocking the area that should have been designated for Gentile prayer. On the way out of the city the disciples see that the fig tree has withered and died – symbolizing the fact that God has cursed and rejected the entire temple system because it was no longer doing what God had created it to do. It had become a barrier keeping people away from God and therefore it would be rejected and replaced by the personal mediation of Jesus Christ.

Tuesday and Wednesday were spent responding to the counter-attacks of the religious leaders, who obviously were not happy with the implications of what Jesus was saying and doing. In Matthew 21:23-27 the religious leaders ask Jesus by what authority he was doing these remarkable things and in response to that he begins to tell a series of parables, and we'll be looking at the first of those in our reading this morning.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 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 changed his mind and went.³⁰ And he went to the other son 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 prostitutes 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 prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.” (Matthew 21:28–32 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

The answers that Jesus gives are always a little more impressive when you remember the questions that he was asked. The religious leaders asked him: “Who do you think you are to propose these kinds of changes?”

Jesus answers by saying: “who do you think you are to ask me questions about the kingdom of God? The tax collectors and prostitutes know more about these things than you.”

Be careful about asking questions of Jesus – that is unofficial point #1.

If you ask questions in a humble spirit, you probably get an answer, but if you ask him in a defiant spirit, you’re generally going to get a rebuke and that’s what this parable is. It is simultaneously a rebuke and an invitation – how it functions in your life, will depend upon the posture of your heart.

So let’s go through it. What is Jesus saying in this parable?

I think the first thing he is saying is this:

We are not saved by being “good people”

Jesus is having this conversation with people who thought they were good people. Look up in your Bible a few lines to verse 23. It says:

And when he entered the temple, **the chief priests and the elders** of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matthew 21:23 ESV)

The CHIEF PRIESTS and the ELDERS – that’s who he is talking to. The good people!! The big shots!! The rich, the noble and the respected. But listen to who he compares them to at the end of the story – he says:

“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.” (Matthew 21:31 ESV)

D.A. Carson says here:

“The shock value of Jesus’ statement can only be appreciated when the low esteem in which tax collectors were held, not to mention prostitutes, is taken into account. . . . But Jesus is saying that the scum of society, though it says no to God, repents, performs the Father’s will, and enters the kingdom, whereas the religious authorities loudly say yes to God but never do what he says, and therefore, they fail to enter. **Their righteousness is not enough.**”¹

Exactly that!

We so often think that it’s about how righteous we are – and of course to figure out how righteous we are we compare ourselves to other people. But that’s like two ants comparing themselves to each other. Either way – you’re still an ant! And the tallest ant is not a horse or a human being.

And that’s the point being made here.

All human beings are fallen. We all fall short of the glory of God – just like all ants fall short of the glory of human beings. So – how do we get back? How do we bridge the gap?

You can’t just stand up a little straighter - even the people we all think of as “the upright” aren’t upright enough. Jesus said that way back in Matthew 5. He said:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20 ESV)

So Jesus points at the biggest ants in the aquarium – or at least the ants who thought they were the biggest ants in the aquarium – and he says: they are nowhere near big enough.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13 Through 28* in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 450.

If that's how you think you are going to get saved, by bulking up as an ant – then you are not even in the game. That is a road that leads to nowhere. And that's what Jesus is saying to these guys: “You are not even in the kingdom conversation because you think you can MORALLY IMPROVE your way into salvation. And that's a fool's errand.”

We're not saved by being or attempting to become “good people”.

And secondly, neither are we saved by saying all “the right things”.

We are not saved by saying “the right things”

The bones of the story have to do with two sons – an older and a younger. The first son – or the older son – at first refuses to do what the father says. But then, later, he changes his mind and he goes back and does what the father had asked. So he's the one in this story who gets it.

The second son – the younger son – he gives lip service to the father. He says, “Oh yes dad. Absolutely sir.” But then he doesn't actually do anything. He stays in the basement and plays video games all day – or whatever the first century equivalent of that was. So he's the one who doesn't get it. He doesn't understand that pleasing the father is about more than just saying the right things. The father's not an idiot. He can see whether you are out in the field doing what he asked you to do or whether you are sitting at home doing whatever it is you want to do. The younger son is only fooling himself.

Friends, there are an awful lot of “younger sons” in the evangelical church in North America today. There are so many people who think they are saved because when they were 10 years old they said “the sinner's prayer”. As if that fooled God!

There is literally a parable from Jesus informing us that it did not.

Yes – he heard what you said, but then he watched to see what you did. So the issue isn't: "What did you say as a 10 year old" the issue is "how are you doing as a 30 year old"? Are you in the field or not?

If you said the sinner's prayer as a 10 year old but you aren't following Jesus today as a grown up – then let me state the obvious: according to this parable, you are not nor were you ever saved.

Am I on the wrong track here?

The parable seems to be saying that words are just words – if they are not accompanied by MOVEMENT. Jesus said this kind of stuff all the time. In Luke 6:46 he said:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 ESV)

Words are only meaningful when they reflect a lived reality.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were definitely talking a good game. They were singing loud in church, they were praying in the King James Version, they were using churchy language – they were talking about the “glory”, they were reflecting upon the “holiness”, they were ruminating upon the “righteousness” – they knew exactly what to say so as to SOUND like they were in the inner circle.

But at the end of the day, they were nowhere.

They didn't respond to John the Baptist's call and they weren't responding to Jesus' call – so all they were, in reality, was a bunch of pretty little parrots sitting and singing on the precipice of hell. Far better to be a prostitute who actually repents and follows Jesus.

That's where the parable lands. Jesus is saying that people are actually saved by turning around and beginning to WALK on the path of salvation.

We are saved by turning around and beginning to walk on the path of salvation

That's why he mentions John the Baptist. Look at verse 32. He says:

“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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.” (Matthew 21:32 ESV)

We would almost expect Jesus to say: “You did not change your minds and believe ME” but he says “HIM” because John the Baptist represented the START of the pathway that leads to salvation. John's message was:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2 ESV)

That's the first step on the road that leads to heaven. You have to stop, turn around and repent.

That word might be the most important word in all the Bible. It is the Greek word *metanoia* and it means:

“to undergo a change in frame of mind and feeling ... to make a change of principle and practice, to reform”²

So this is like Saul on the Road to Damascus – we talked about that a few weeks ago. In Acts 9 Saul is heading north toward Damascus – he is breathing out threats against the church – he is going there to arrest believers and drag them back to Jerusalem in chains. He's a man on a mission – and then all of the sudden:

²MGD, s.v. “μετανοέω,” paragraph 9638.

“a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”(Acts 9:3–5 ESV)

And after that Saul was never the same again. He went up to Damascus a persecutor of the church and he came down from Damascus a preacher of the Gospel.

That’s the kind of fundamental CHANGE we are talking about here.

John called upon people to fundamentally re-evaluate and reorient. He said loud and clear: “We are on the wrong track here people! The road we’re on is the road to hell. You need to get off now! You need to repent! You need to go a different way.”

And then when he saw the Pioneer and Perfector of that way he pointed toward him and said:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

That’s the way to abundant and everlasting life. Stop whatever it is you are doing and start following him.

That was John’s advice – and that was Jesus’ rebuke to the religious leaders of the day. You should have listened to John and you should have followed me.

What would that look like for someone today?

Now, obviously this encounter happened a long time ago and these people were very different than us. They were SURE that they had it right. They were SURE that the path they were on was the righteous path. They were in the majority and John and Jesus were literally voices crying out

in the wilderness.

But when you put it that way, maybe they weren't so different from us today. After all most Canadians are SURE that they're on the right side of things. Most Canadians think of themselves as "GOOD PEOPLE". Judging ourselves to be "GOOD PEOPLE" – particularly in comparison to our southern neighbours, is literally our national past time. We are the Pharisees – and they are the tax collectors and prostitutes.

But like Jesus is saying here, relative goodness is of interest only to fools.

Are you better than them?

Maybe. Maybe not. Doesn't matter – what matters is whether you are on the path that leads to eternal life – because I've got news for you friend, you are a special creature. You were created in the image and likeness of God. You are not a mere animal and you have a future beyond death and the grave. When history is over you will stand before God in the flesh and give an account for how you lived your life. And from that appointment you will go somewhere and you will exist somewhere for all eternity, and therefore it really, really matters whether or not you are on the path that leads to eternal life.

So, how do we respond to this maximally important parable?

And I think the answer is, the same way Jesus, like John before him, wanted the religious leaders to respond. He wanted them first of all to STOP.

1. Stop

Most of us are SO SURE that we are on the right side of things – even though, in our situation, we've only been walking on this path for about 10 minutes. In that sense we are even more

arrogant than the chief priests and elders in this story. At least they could say that they had been walking on their road for hundreds and even thousands of years – but we can't say that, as modern-day Canadians. Most of what we think of as “righteous” in this country would have been considered wicked and abominable just two generations ago. Imagine if you could go back to 1923 – 100 years ago - when my grandparents were teenagers. Imagine you got the chance to sit down with them and to explain to them contemporary Canadian moral standards – what do you think they would do? I'm pretty sure my Grandpa would haul out his shotgun and run you off his porch – and they weren't even Christians then. They were just Canadians – but no Canadians then believed what Canadians believe today – so how in the world can you be so certain that you are really and truly walking in the way of righteousness.

What if all that you believe is just momentary fashion?

What if what passes for consensus is just the madness of crowds?

Can't you at least stop for just a moment and think about that possibility?

That's where it all begins.

It all begins with questioning your certainties and doubting your doubts. Maybe what you think is true isn't true. And maybe what you've been told to doubt, isn't that unlikely at all. Is it really unlikely that behind all of this there might be some kind of Creator? Is it really unlikely to think that he might care how we live and act and behave? Is it really unlikely that he might not have spoken to the creatures whom he indued with such dignity and worth? And is it so unlikely to think that at some point in the past he might have condescended to enter our story so as to do for us what we could not do for ourselves?

Is all of that really as unlikely as you've been told?

You should stop and think about that because every salvation story begins at precisely that point. That's what Jesus meant when he talked about being poor in spirit. You have to know that maybe you don't know and you have to be willing to look for what you were once sure wasn't there.

And that's the second step. You have to stop and then you have to see.

2. See

John's ministry took place at the transition between step one and step two. His job was to tell people to stop and then to point them to Jesus.

John was this guy: (mime stop sign and redirect)

Stop and look:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

That's what you need to do. You need to stop and you need to look at Jesus – specifically you need to look at Jesus on the cross.

What do you think that means?

Why do you think he is there?

Do you think Jesus is there because he was a sinner? No, that can't be it. Jesus asked a question no other human being could ever have asked. He said:

“Which one of you convicts me of sin?” (John 8:46 ESV)

I would never even DREAM of asking that question. My mom goes to this church. If I ever

asked that question she'd be out of her seat so fast. She'd come up to the front with a list of 58 stories she could share on a moment's notice. It would be a race between her and my wife who'd be coming with an even longer list – so no chance I will ever be asking that question.

But Jesus did.

And nobody said a word.

So he's not up there because of his sin – so whose sin is he there for? You need to think about that.

And why do sins have to be paid for in the first place? Why couldn't God just WAVE THEM AWAY? Why couldn't he just give us a pass? The cross is challenging you to think about that – because there is a dead human being on that cross. And not any human being. That's Jesus Christ! The best human being who ever lived. And not just the best human being that ever lived – that's God in the flesh. That's the second person of the Trinity. That's infinite perfection and infinite worth; which makes you wonder, how much does God care about sin?

And how much does God care about us?

That's exactly what you are supposed to be thinking about when you look at the Body of Jesus on the cross.

The Apostle Paul thought about that and he provided perhaps the most insightful reflection in human history. He looked at Jesus there and he said:

“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:26 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

Paul looked at the cross, thought about everything he was supposed to think about and came to the conclusion that in Christ God was being JUST. He was making a payment that more than equaled the debt that was owed.

And he was also being merciful.

He was offering us a way to come home. He was saying: “If you come home this way – through the person and work of Christ – then you will be accepted. You will be forgiven. You will be restored. The blood covers all.”

So you’ve got to stop; you’ve got to see that and you’ve got to surrender. That’s the third thing.

3. Surrender

To surrender to Jesus means to swear allegiance to him as your Lord and Savior. There’s no salvation without that.

To come BACK is to come UNDER.

That’s the deal.

You kneel at the cross. You confess your sin. You swear allegiance to him as your Lord and Savior. You rise and follow - that’s the way home!

The tax collectors and prostitutes saw that door in Jesus’ day and they came through it in droves. They understood what they were being offered. A fresh start. A clean slate and a chance to follow someone who actually knows where they are going.

Does that sound good to you?

Then come!

This is the path – walk ye in it.

All the Christian sacraments were designed to help you enter this path and to walk this path your whole life long. The word “sacrament” is a borrowed word from the Roman military. It originally meant to swear allegiance to your General. Now it means to swear allegiance to Christ as Lord.

We do that once a month through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper – that’s the monthly Christian pledge of allegiance. The initial pledge happens when you go through the waters of baptism.

When you go under the water you are saying: “I am dying to myself. I am no longer in charge. I am not the captain of my own ship. I surrender to Jesus. I swear allegiance to him.” When you come back up you are saying: “From now on I live for Jesus. He is my Lord and Master. I follow him.”

We have a baptism service scheduled for next Sunday and there is still plenty of room in the tank. So if you have come to the point of faith today then I invite you to make that miracle known. I’m going to ask everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes now. Pastor Matt and I are the only ones looking so if you would like to have someone speak to you after the service about baptism I’d like you to raise your hand now.

It doesn’t matter if you are a good person or a bad person. It doesn’t matter if you are a member of the social elite, or a drug dealer or a prostitute because all of that is going to be washed away by the blood of the Lamb.

So come.

Come unto Jesus and be saved.

Thanks be to God. Let me pray for us.