



Matthew 21:23-32 - <sup>23</sup> Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>25</sup> John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup> “ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

## *A Tale of Two Sons*

*-A pious liar  
-A repentant worker*



*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!  
(1 John 3:1)*

When I was a senior in high school, I endeavored to read through one of the most popular novels of historical fiction; Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. I checked out the book from the library, I opened its cover, and I began to read. I don't know if my surroundings were distracting me. Maybe I wasn't familiar enough with the historical setting of the novel, but I think I read about thirty pages of the book and quit. After some subsequent research and reading, I found out that the plot of the story played out in two cities: Paris and London. The historical setting for the book takes place just before and follows through the French Revolution. Dickens wrote about the plight of the peasants in France and the equally unfavorable social parallels in London at the same time period. There's a father/daughter reunion after imprisonment, a wedding that stirs up old rivalries, and a bunch more mid-nineteenth century British novel fodder. I can't tell you much beyond that – what a short You Tube video and a glance at what a Wikipedia article provided. I still haven't read the book, but at least I'm moving in the right direction. I can't tell you a tale of two cities, but I can let Jesus tell you a tale of two sons: one, a pious liar, and the other a repentant worker.

Knowing the setting of this tale of two sons will be helpful. Where are we in Jesus' earthly ministry? We're in Holy Week – mere days away from the upper room, the cross of Calvary, and the empty tomb. Jesus came to Jerusalem to accomplish the world's salvation and on Palm Sunday he was welcomed like a king. He walked into the temple courts and literally flipped the tables on the money changers and merchants. He gave sight to the blind and healed the lame. He was teaching with authority, and everyone loved it...well, almost everyone. The religious leaders came and asked him, **By what authority are you doing these things?** What gives you the right? Who made you the boss, Jesus? Jesus then figuratively flipped the tables on them, *I'll answer your question if you answer mine, John's baptism – where did it come from? From heaven or from men?* In other words, if John's ministry, if my ministry *is*, in fact, from God, why don't you believe? Jesus wasn't just snapping back at his opponents – he was calling them to repentance. Jesus calls all of us to repentance. It's not a matter of saying the right things, but doing what God wants done. Jesus does not call us to be pious liars, but repentant workers in his kingdom. To make that point clear, Jesus tells a tale of two sons.

Jesus said, **"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.** The first son says "no" but ends up changing his mind and going. This boy defies his father. He tells Dad how he really feels, and he doesn't mince words. The second son's answer: **"I will, sir,"** but he does nothing. This son was a 'yes' man, a people pleaser. But he's all talk. He flat out lies to his Dad, just saying what the old man wanted to hear. In this tale of two sons, each boy represents a group of people. Who are they? The son who says all the right things, but doesn't carry out the will of the father...these are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who had God's Word yet refused Jesus, the fulfillment of the Word. The son who initially resisted the father's will but later changed his mind and did what his father asked...these are sinners who repent of their sin and turn to their Savior in faith.



So, where do you find yourself in this parable? After hearing the loving call to repent from our heavenly Father, are we all talk? The pious liar talks a good game but never acts. Notice how this son responded to his father's command. **"I will, sir."** Yes sir, right away, sir, I'm on top of it, Dad! This boy knew how to say the right things, but true obedience to the Father isn't simply saying the right things, but doing what the Father wants done. Remember, Jesus is speaking this parable to the religious leaders. From all the outward appearances, these Pharisees and teachers of the law were devout men of God. If anybody had this whole "religion thing" figured out, it was them. But Jesus called them hypocrites, sons of the devil, white washed tombs – pretty and shiny on the outside, but inside full of death. Meanwhile, with whom does Jesus spend quite a bit of his time? Tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners of all sorts. Why? Not to condone their sin, but to call them away from it. What's the difference? Their different responses to the same invitation from Jesus – *repent and believe!* Where do you find yourself in this parable? What does God desire; the empty promise of a Pharisee or repentance and obedience from the sinner? Am I outright defiant of my Father's will, or do I play it a little closer to the chest?

In his Word, God makes his will clear to each of us, his children. His call to turn away from sin and trust in his forgiveness is a constant. But are we ever like that first son? *"I will not go out and work. I'd rather do my own thing for a while. I've got more important stuff going on."* It might be hard to imagine ourselves ever being so openly defiant of God's will. Even though we may have never boldly screamed, "NO!" in the face of our heavenly Father, aren't there more times when our actions speak louder than our words ever could? I know it's wrong, but no one will ever find out. NO! I'll deal with that sin of weakness later – when I'm out of school, when I'm married, when the kids are grown. NO! I'll make the Word and work of God more of a priority when stuff settles down around here. Or are we more of the "second son" type of people? We know how to say all the right things about love and grace and forgiveness. We talk a big game about loving God and our neighbor more than ourselves, but inside all we really want is recognition. We hear God's call to turn from sin and trust in him, but we never get around to it, because that's for those *other* people. Sure, I'll admit I'm a sinner...sort of. Not as bad as that guy. While we might pull the wool over other peoples' eyes, God isn't so easily fooled. So, which son are you? If we're honest with ourselves – a little bit of both.

In the case of that first son, he defied his father's wishes but later he changed his mind. Literally, 'he repented, turned around.' What brought him back? Why did he go to work? Because his father was a good dad. He was loving. The father had planted the seeds of his love in his son's heart. So it goes with us. Even in the face of our sinful rebellion or smug pride, our Father calls us back through his word of forgiveness. God's grace hasn't been turned away from us. We've been called into God's family, welcomed by the Holy Spirit through the waters of baptism. We've been given the robe of Christ's righteousness to wear and now we go out to work. Remembering who we are because of Christ makes all the difference. We hear God's call to turn from sin and trust in him and because of the Holy Spirit, we can boldly say "No!" to sin and disobedience and gladly say, "Yes!" to obeying our Father who loves us.

This real repentance that God is looking for isn't just a onetime thing. It's a life-long endeavor. In a few weeks, we'll celebrate the Reformation, commemorating the day that Martin Luther posted the 95 theses. Do you know what thesis number one was? Right at the top of the list: *Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said, "Repent," he willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.* Every single day we wake up to the same call of our Father to die to sin and live for righteousness. Every single day we remember who we are in Christ through our baptism and we are called to drown our sinful nature. But at the end of each day we find the blood of sin staining our hands. We see in stunning clarity all the ways we've went wrong today – just how many times I've been the



first son and shouted “NO!” to my loving Father; just how many times I acted like the second son, looking at the supposed ‘good’ things I did and realize that I did it all just to look good in front of other people, not gladly for my God. At the end of each day, I’m confronted by all of my ‘first son’ rebellion and all of my ‘second son’ sanctimonious smugness. And then I realize how profoundly, how deeply I need the third Son – the One not mentioned in the parable, but the One who makes all the difference.

We heard about him in our second lesson, **“Christ Jesus...did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”** Jesus is the perfect Son of the Father, the One who submitted to his Father’s will – never once defying God, not even balking at death on a cross. He carried out his Father’s will perfectly, because it meant your salvation. Jesus is the perfect Son of the Father – the One whose every thought, word, and action was lived in your place, and then given as a sacrifice to pay for your sins and mine. Where we failed, Jesus followed through. Where we wanted to glorify only ourselves, Jesus shined the divine spotlight on God’s saving love by shedding his blood and rising from the dead – for you. As the perfect Son, Jesus refused to do what we insist and insisted on doing what we refuse – why? So he could call you his brother, his sister. So that when he calls you to turn from sin and trust in his forgiveness, you can know he’s waiting for you with arms wide open. In this tale of two sons, thank God for the third Son, our perfect brother, Jesus!

Amen

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen*  
*(Jude 24-25)*