

The Parable of the Two Sons

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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.' 29And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. 30And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. 31Which 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. 32For 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. (Matthew 21: 28-32)

When I've thought of this parable in the past, I used to wonder why Jesus is critical of the chief priests and Pharisees to whom the parable was stated. After all, they give the right answer. The first son indeed was the one who did his father's will. With his lips he may have denied the master, but what counted was what he actually *did*. The second son was the adverse—his lips indicated obedience to the master, yet his actions did not.

Although the chief priests give the correct answer, Jesus still condemns them as lesser than "tax collectors and harlots." What made the tax collectors and harlots different than the chief priests was their reaction to the teaching of John the Baptist. Although they were sinners they paid heed and became followers of the "way of righteousness." The chief priest did not do this.

On this passage, the Navarre Bible Commentary states:

The scribes and Pharisees would not believe [John the Baptist], yet they boasted of their faithfulness to God's teaching. They were like the son who says "I will go" and then does not go.¹

With their lips the chief priests and Pharisees speak of righteousness, but in their actions they remain obstinate and refuse to follow.

Verse 45 goes on to say: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them."

First Son Tax Collectors/Harlots	Received instruction	Did not claim to follow righteousness	Followed righteousness in action
Second Son Chief Priests/Pharisees	Received instruction	Claimed to follow righteousness	Did not follow righteousness in action

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You see how in the chart, it's the last column that ultimately counts in Jesus' parable.

I submit that the parable ties in to James chapter 2:

¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe -- and shudder.

²⁰Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren?

²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, ²³and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"; and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:19-24)

James points out that the demons can recognize the glory of God. Yet, this kind of "belief" is no belief at all without what he calls "works." These "works," James says, are with faith like a body and spirit (v. 26) which when separated are "dead." To him, faith-works is thus a singular concept, just as a "body and spirit" make up a single person. It is this single concept that James says "justifies" a person.

Getting back to Matthew's Gospel, we see the same thing in the parable, especially when we understand Matthew's teaching on God's will. At the end of the parable, Jesus' question is simply to ask which son "did the will of his father?" This is a salvific idea in Matthew's Gospel which parallels James' later epistle:

"Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

You see in the above verse the same paraphrase as in the parable of the two sons: "he who does the will of my Father." True salvific faith is indivisibly entwined with "doing the will of the Father." Matthew 7:21 is an extension of the Parable of the Two Sons: one cannot merely take for granted that one has "faith" and therefore not worry about whether he has "works."

Thus, when Jesus criticized the chief priests, he was pointing out how they were less than tax collectors and harlots who actually did the will of the Father by following John the Baptist's lead in the "way of righteousness." The tax collectors and harlots could not have merely said, "We believe your message, John" unless they changed, followed, and acted on that message. They represented the first son who had not previously acknowledged the father's will, but turned from their way. The second son remained smug in his confession and did not follow through. And so the chief priests and Pharisees remained outside the will of the Father as did the second son.

¹Navarre Bible Commentary: Matthew. Scepter Publishers, New York. 2005. p. 142-143.