

Allow me the liberty of adding a few details to our story – with the hope it might have the same explosive impact on us, that it did on Jesus’ audience.

Once upon a time there was an owner of a large vineyard who had two sons: James and John.

James was the oldest and so was the heir apparent to the vineyard. Being the first-born, he was the apple of his father’s eye, and enjoyed a very special relationship with him.

The father had great hopes and plans for James, placed great trust in him, and relied deeply upon him.

For his part, James seemed to be fitting in well with his father’s plans. He went around telling everyone what a great man his father was, boasting about how much he loved him, and declaring that he would do anything to please him.

However, James was quite the snob – he had a sense of entitlement – that he deserved certain things and should be treated in a certain way. He had no time for his younger brother and absolutely despised the servants.

John was the second son. Though good-hearted, he was very jealous of his older brother. He felt let out of things, and was deeply hurt at always having to take second place.

People tried to help him, but succeeded only in alienating him further from his father and his older brother. He fell in with bad company, and began to live a loose life. His conduct brought great sadness to his father who, nevertheless – was patient with him, continued to love him, and refused to throw him out of the house as some were urging him to do.

The harvest time came along, and the grapes had to be picked. Every hand was needed.

So the father went to his two sons and asked them to help out. Now would you not expect that James, the oldest, would drop everything, and go at once into the vineyard?

And would you not expect John, the youngest, to start complaining and refuse to go? But this is not what happens, and this is why the story became so interesting to those listening to Jesus.

Of course James said at once: “Sure, Dad, I’ll go right away.” So far so good. But in fact he did not go. Why not? Because he did not love his father as much as he thought he did. . . In reality he was selfish, proud, and very complacent. He was the first-born after all. He was the heir. Everything was guaranteed to him – so why work? After all, what were a younger brother and the servants there for?

And naturally, as we would expect, John said: “Look, Dad, I’m not going! Ask someone else!” So far, so bad – but he had second thoughts, and in the end went to the vineyard. How come?

Somehow he suddenly realized how good his father was, and how selfish he had become. He saw, too, that his father, far from writing him off as he deserved, still loved him and trusted him.

Now here comes the explosion—as we listen to Jesus’ application. Remember he was addressing the chief priest and elders of the people, who despised tax collectors and sinners. . .

Jesus said: “You (chief priests and elders) are like the older son. . . because you SAY you are God’s children, and you BOAST about your obedience to God’s commandments. But your love is illusory. You are not pleasing to God. And the people you despise – the tax collectors and sinners --- they are like the younger son – they have repented of their careless ways – and have begun to do the will of God.”

It was a scandalous and outrageous statement to make! They (the chief priests and elders) were the heirs. All their lives they had harbored that flattering and soothing conviction. They had a sense of entitlement – they deserved certain things and should be treated in a certain way ---

And so they were furious, because Jesus –in one fell swoop --- had turned their world upside down!

The meaning of the Jesus' parable then was crystal clear. The Jewish people were the ones who said they would obey God – but did not. The tax collectors and sinners were those who said they would not obey God – but then repented and did obey. . .

We are dealing, then, in the parable – not with two individuals --- but with two sets of people. Jesus was not really praising either set. Both were imperfect – because neither son in the story acted in a way that would bring total joy to his father. Both were unsatisfactory.

But the one who finally did obey his father, was better than the other. Of course the ideal son would be the one who immediately said yes – and then carried out his father's wishes. . .

We all know there are some people who will promise anything. At the onset of any project, they are loud in their willingness and ability and loyalty. But when it comes to actually doing something – they are not to be found.

And then there are others who are initially reluctant to promise or commit to anything – and from whom little can be expected. And yet when the going gets rough – these are the ones who really get going. . .

The parable teaches us that promises can never take the place of performance --- and fine words can never be a substitute for good deeds and quite honestly we have to admit there is a little bit of both sons pulsing within us . . .

Part of us boldly says “yes” to God with our words – and part of us says “no” to God with our deeds.

This parable challenges us to constantly be examining ourselves. . . we must try to turn our promises into fulfillment – to turn our words into deeds – and quickly lose whatever sense of entitlement we may have: to think we deserve certain things and should be treated in a certain way.

We must see ourselves in need of continual conversion. Every day we can turn one of yesterday's NOs into a YES of today.

Vincent van Gogh once said, “the only choice I have is between being a good painter and a bad one.” The same choice is ours: we have the choice between being a good Christian – or a bad one. One talks the talk – but the other walks the walk.