

Sermon Notes: October 1, 2023 **Focus:** Parable to the two Sons in Matthew [Lectionary](#)

The parable has more than just “Amazing Grace” if we will try to see it.

When Kimberly and I were raising toddlers, they had the wonderful, very normal habit of overextension. My son would hold a banana and call it a banana. Then, he would point that banana at a car because it was a banana too. It was cute and we had lots of fun helping them figure it all out.

When we read any Bible story, it is very easy to take what we know and overextend it as well. “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” *Abraham Maslow*. If you are suspicious of politics and power plays, you will likely see revolution everywhere in the Bible – that is a favorite nail that I sometimes overextend.

Let’s say you come to the Bible from a different angle. If you are in recovery from addiction, you might read every story as a call to redemption and personal responsibility. Alternately, if you open the Bible to a random page to get wisdom for a problem, you will likely see the Bible as spiritual magic. None of these modes are *bad* per se, but without more tools in your tool belt, they become a tired, one hit wonders.

The Bible is not a wood board waiting for you bang out your own predilections. There are stories of history, creation myths, poetry, satire, why-do-bad-things-happen-to-good-people wisdom, lament, repentance, renewal, political commentary, exaltation, church community building, end-of-the-world-drama, anti-capitalist impulses, and holiness codes. Even the Bible, the book as we know it, came to be from blood and politics. Yes, the Holy Spirit is in charge, but she lets messy humans do the work. It’s complicated.

Parable of Two Sons One father, two sons. The father needs both to help. One pretends eagerness to help but does nothing. The other ignores his father, but ultimately returns to help. The one who returns is the one who does the work of God. I really like its redemptive arc. It is kind of like the parable of the prodigal son but with a different back story. There is praise for the one who returns. But let’s see if there might be a few more nuts and bolts in addition to the “I was blind, now I see” nail in the story. I will return to the redemptive arc in page 2 of the notes.

Socioeconomic Divisions: Jesus’ society was very “caste” conscious. Land - owning elite, well-educated clergy and politicians stood on one side, while numerous peasants and laborers were on the other side with 95% of the population. It was almost an expectation that the powerful would tread on the powerless as a generational birth right. The elite were not expected to lift a finger to help their society because they were so valuable just being elite. The underclass was solely there for them and their whims. So, when Jesus tells the parable about the son who pretended to go to work but does not, he is talking to the elite and religious leaders standing right in front of him, who would be scandalized if they were expected to help anyone but themselves.

Moral and Ethical Expectations: Repentance and obedience to God's commandments were highly valued virtues. Yet, Jesus *disrespects* the respectable and *elevates* the underclass. He thinks tax collectors and prostitutes are better examples of virtue because they are willing to repent (turn around) when things go wrong. When we think about our own life and spirituality, our work is not merely to understand God's will, but to respond and turn toward God's activity in the world.

The chapter before the 'two sons' (a donkey, some dancing, and a tantrum) I want to back up a little from today's parable to give you a small map of how we get here. *Earlier in Chapter 21 Triumphal Entry:* The people were celebrating Jesus. They were singing in the streets about him. I suspect part of his popularity was his boldness and fearlessness around the powerful. He dismounts from his 'regal' donkey and heads straight to the Jerusalem Temple to throw an economic fit. There, he flips over the money changers' tables because of his disgust for the economic grift that religious offerings had become.

He wants those calling the shots to know how ridiculous and contempt worthy it was for them to treat the temple as their piggy bank. The parable of the two sons was a direct response to the challenges he has faced after he flipped over the money changers' tables. In today's parable, it is the son who disrespected his father, but still returns to work, who is the real hero. The heroes are not the entitled elite paying lip service while grumping about Jesus. It is the returning son who is building up the Temple that God intended. The temple was always meant to be a beacon of healing, justice, and equality, not just budget line items, nice offices for clergy, and fancy stones.

(Also in the chapter, a fig tree) After he stirred the temple pot, he goes outside of Jerusalem to Bethany where he oddly curses a barren fig tree. He is cursing the religious elite and politically connected who just want to shut him down. Once the tree is cursed, he returns to the Jerusalem Temple. The elders ask him "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" He answers them with a riddle that they refuse to answer.

Now, the two sons parable itself The father says to his son that it's time to go work. This son piously says, "of course," but forever hits the snooze button. The second is rude and disrespectful and tells the father bug off, but later returns to fulfill his calling. Knowing God's will but hitting the snooze button is worthless. Learning the will of God, rejecting it, but ultimately finding a way to serve other is gold. The punchline of the parable is: "*Truly I tell you; the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you*" because they changed their minds (21:31-32).

How do you read it? If you read this solely as a parable of personal responsibility, you *will* get something out of it. But like I mentioned earlier, see if you can find more tools: listen for the call to egalitarian holiness, listen for the critique of power that is deaf to service, listen to Jesus' profound distaste for the economic and social exploitation of the weak. You can pray for genuine spiritual transformation and for the strength to challenge the self-righteous attitudes in others as well as yourself. In *hearing* and *doing* justice, you will find your calling and healing.

Todd