

October 1, 2023 (Pentecost 18 A)

Matthew 21:28-32
“Repentance Inspection”

Sixteen years ago, when we were in China, I found myself stuck in a confusing situation. I was trying to buy something from a vendor – but when I handed her a 20 Yuan bill . . . she promptly handed it right back to me. I tried again, but she wouldn’t take it. *What am I missing here? I give you the money, and you give me what I want to buy!* I – the ignorant tourist – didn’t know what to do. Thinking maybe she didn’t have change (or something) I gave her a few smaller bills, which she gladly accepted. Confused, I went and asked the guide who was with us. She explained that the bill was a forgery. Purely by touch the lady behind the counter knew it was counterfeit and would not accept it.

We’re not here today to talk about counterfeit currency – but we ARE going to discuss **counterfeit repentance**. All of us can take a moment here and perform a **“Repentance Inspection”** of our own Christian faith. To do that we’re going to use Jesus’ own words from our Gospel Lesson today:

Matthew 21:28–32 (NIV 11)

28 “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.’ 29 “‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

31 “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 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.

Let’s start with the second son: he knew the Father; he knew what the Father wanted of him . . . and he SAID the right things. *What was the problem?* He didn’t **DO** what he said he would do – his words were worthless / they were counterfeit. God knew it – and He wouldn’t accept it.

This section of **Matthew** and the verses right here before us make it clear WHO Jesus was talking to back then. Jesus told this parable in Jerusalem the very week He would be crucified. The hatred against Him was brewing and surging among the religious leaders of the day. While Jesus, on the other hand, kept reaching out to them – for He wanted to save them too. He stabbed at their hypocrisy and stone-cold hearts – but they would not crumble in repentance and believe His claims. They would not change their minds or their ways. They just went right on scheming and plotting on how they could get rid of Him. Jesus knew what they were up to and He was ready to face it. But still, He kept giving them opportunities. These were people who *claimed* to know and follow God – but with their actions they did NOTHING that God actually wanted them to do. It was all outward / all for show – only to impress men and God was not fooled by it.

Jesus owns the vineyard and only Jesus can put us to work in His Kingdom. Fallen human beings aren’t good enough for God’s Kingdom, so Christ was the perfect Solution God came up with. His pure and holy life is what God expects and His horrible death and crucifixion provided atonement for all. It opened the gate to God’s Kingdom by cancelling out our sins.

ALL of us can now go in through *Him*. Even prostitutes and tax collectors – as Jesus points out. They are like **the first son in his story**. They initially said: “NO” to God. They chose to live apart from Him and his ways. They wanted their greedy and wicked ways. They wanted to do their OWN thing, live their own lives in their lust and sin. But, things changed. They realized they were wrong; that God was right. And because God’s forgiveness is boundless in Christ, they (repentant sinners) were entering God’s Kingdom and letting Him rule in their hearts and lives and then getting to enjoy fruitful labor before eternal life. God accepts ANYONE! His grace and forgiveness in Christ is there for the whole world to take advantage of; for people of all time.

Who is Jesus talking to today? *Could it be people like us?* We SAY we know and follow God . . . we dress up and come to church, we publically worship and repent of our sins, we can easily utter the right words . . . but do we follow through and **DO** what it is our Heavenly Father wants from us?

Do a little **repentance inspection** and ask yourself: *Have I offered God counterfeit repentance? Have I SAID I would follow Him – only to go out and follow the crowds? Have I told Him I **repent** of that sin – only to go and chase it down again the first chance I get? Have I said God rules in my heart and in my life – but in reality I rule in my heart and in my life, and I will only DO the things that I want to do? Have I said I would love my neighbor as myself – when in reality I'm out for #1 and everyone else can take a back seat?*

If you're like me, then you've handed our Heavenly Father WADS of counterfeit repentance over the years. If you're like me then you're more like the second son than the first . . . the WORDS were easy, but the actions and the follow through . . . *not so much*.

Jesus calls us to **genuine repentance** here and puts both them and us to shame by pointing to the tax collectors and the prostitutes! Today He could point to many addicts, criminals, and immoral people who have been confronted by God and who have (by His grace and power) dramatically turned their lives around. It wasn't easy for them to repent of their former lifestyles. You and I are, at heart, no better than anyone in the “ditch” out there. He calls us to REPENT, and He wants to see genuine repentance.

We can, I suppose, react like many of those Pharisees did who smugly ignored Him, ignored John the Baptist, and went off in their unrepentant self-righteousness to their own destruction – **or** – we can take His words to heart.

The only reason Jesus comes to us today in this powerful little lesson is that He **LOVES** us. In grace and mercy He reaches out to us yet again. He doesn't *want just words*, He wants the heart. If these words cut you to the heart – then good; **He's got you!** He's FORGIVEN you. He calls you His very own child and assures you that you have a place in His heart, in His home, and in His WORK too.

Then He says to us all over again: *My son / my daughter – go and work today in my vineyard.* But . . . what about the **thief on the cross**? Jesus told him today you will be with me in paradise! He was the first son – he lived his life as a criminal. When God approached him he was already dying . . . all he did was utter some WORDS, with no opportunity to put them into action. **That's just it!** We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone – when God gets the heart He gets everything else too. As Luther said, “*Faith is a living,*

busy, active, mighty, thing!” The dying thief, saved by grace and through faith alone, didn't have the time or **opportunity** to get out there and WORK in His vineyard. If he did, you can bet he would have – for the Lord got hold of his heart.

But . . . **YOU and I do have time and opportunity!** Our past – like his, is purged and cleansed by the Blood of Jesus. Now God points us **forward** and says to us: *My children – get to work in my vineyard!* You know what He calls us to do – we call it the Great Commission: “**Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.**” (*Matthew 28:19-20*). HIS work is bringing salvation to other lost souls and building up His eternal Kingdom of repentant saints made holy in the Blood of Jesus.

We are ALL a part of that work. Whatever our role might be in His plans – it is important. Everything produced by genuine repentance is pleasing to our Heavenly Father. From coming here to learn from God's Word and praise Him in worship – to the offerings we joyfully give – to the service we render in all different aspects of congregational life – to the countless things we do to “let our light shine” in our personal lives as we seek to share the love and truth of Christ in the world around us – in a million different big and little ways.

When the DAY is over – either for us personally or when He returns in glory . . . ALL that is sinful and counterfeit will be burned up and forgotten . . . but all that is genuine and done for God and His work in faith . . . **will remain**. It counts. It is recorded. It will not be forgotten. It made a difference. It will even be rewarded, although we do not deserve it. It will be praised and esteemed by your Heavenly Father. The service itself is (in many ways) its own reward (we are but unworthy servants simply doing our duty) – but God says He'll reward it anyways – Grace upon GRACE – because He simply loves giving His children blessings.

Today is a new day, and your Lord has **work** for you to do, so let's get to it – and seize the day, for we do not know how many of them are left for us to toil down here under the sun in His vineyard – and if all of our efforts reach only one person . . . it's MORE than worth it!