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Peace, Sun Prairie  
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Pentecost 19  
Matthew 21:28-32

## MORE THAN WORDS

Jesus spells out a scenario every parent can identify with. Listen again to Matthew 21: *“What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went. He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, ‘I will go sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”*

It is important to understand that with this parable Jesus is not talking about tasks we are to do in His Kingdom or whether we’ve obeyed the Ten Commandments. Listen again to see if you can pick up what Jesus is driving at. Jesus is speaking to the church leaders of His day. He says, *“What do you think? Which of the two did the will of his father?” said to him, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Amen, I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”*

Did you catch that? Jesus chides the church leaders NOT for not doing enough things to serve God, but for not repenting and believing. That’s what the heavenly Father wills of us. To repent and believe in Jesus. That’s how the tax collectors and prostitutes in Jesus’ day WERE responding to the Gospel. They were repenting and believing in Him. They were the son who at first was defiant, but later relented. Incidentally, tax collectors in Jesus’ day were regarded as lowlifes, not much more highly than human traffickers or drug dealers would be regarded today.

The mother of a troubled teen will look for anything, a smile, a one word reply that is at least not angry, a willingness to eat something she cooked, even if in silence, any little thing she can hang on to as a token of her yearning one day to have him back again. Your heavenly Father reaches out to you. Before you can do anything good or bad He already regards you as His child, His son. He calls to you.

Which son are you? The first or the second? Are you among the self-righteous church leaders who did not think they needed to repent? Or are you among the tax collectors and prostitutes?

Maybe you’re thinking, “I probably fall somewhere in the middle. I’m not among the tax collectors and prostitutes, but I do know I’m a sinner so I’m not one of the Pharisees either.”

But you know what? That’s not one of the options. There is no middle. If you are not counted among the tax collectors and prostitutes, then you are one of the Pharisees. And let me warn you, self-righteousness is a far deadlier sin.

Now, let’s not permit our perverse sinful nature to twist this around to make it as though being a prostitute is somehow a virtue. Not at all. The point is that the tax collectors and prostitutes repented, not that they stayed in their sin. They turned away from their sin—to Jesus—for forgiveness. The Greek word here in Matthew 21 literally means that the way they thought about things changed.

But the Pharisees’ thinking did not change. Why should it? They were fine the way they were. They were the son who outwardly says, “Yes Sir! I’ll be obedient!” but never did do what God really wanted.

You may have heard of comedian Jeff Foxworthy. He is known for his observations: You just might be a redneck, if...

Following that same format, but without the humor:

If you think, "I know I'm bad but I'm not that bad," then you are a Pharisee.

If you think, "I'm too old, my life is too dull, to be egregiously sinful," you are a Pharisee.

If you think, "Jesus forgives me because he knows I'm one of the good guys. He knows I'm on His side," you are a Pharisee.

If you believe that the other political party is the seat of all that is evil and its adherents are either wicked or dupes, you are a Pharisee.

If you assess a person's reaction to Covid concluding they are either deluded or callously uncaring, you are a Pharisee.

If you are alarmed at the sins of some—rioting or pornography, for example—but not at the gossip, greed, gluttony, or neglect of God's Word in your own life, you are a Pharisee.

If you react with anger or disapproval of those who are not like you, but you are much more forgiving and easy toward those who are like you, you are a Pharisee.

If you think, "I'm doing pretty good because I realize what a sinner I am," you are a Pharisee.

Are you flailing yet? Getting a sense of how deeply self-righteousness is rooted in our naturally depraved hearts? Perhaps we have pulled back the bandage just a bit to see how mortal is our wound, to get a whiff of the rotting death there and to see how impossible it is for us to merit life.

And yet... there was Jesus. There was God the Father speaking through the person of His Son Jesus, speaking this parable, reaching out to those Pharisees. For you see, Jesus did not only love the tax collectors and prostitutes. He also loved those Pharisees. He did not only come to save the tax collectors and prostitutes. He also came to save the Pharisees.

Therefore Jesus invites us, "Don't trust to your own righteousness. For your righteousness is like filthy rags. Rather find your righteousness in me. I am your righteousness. I am your holiness. I am your goodness. I labored to keep every Commandment without faltering. Believe in me. For all that I am and have I give to you. It is yours.

"I also atoned for your unrighteousness by my death on the cross. Therefore my heavenly Father looks at you only with approval, with friendliness, with love, with kindness and with peace. I am His Son, but for my sake He regards you also as His son, His child.

"Turn to me and give me the honor of providing you all that you need to have salvation and eternal life. And let your agitated heart find rest.

"Then go about your day not under a cloud of dread or anger but joyfully with the bright shining rays of my Father's grace beaming on you. For that will give the Father pleasure. That is His will. Then you will be like the obedient son."

Amen.