

The Son Who Went Not

Studies in the Parables

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Bible Text: Matthew 21:23-32

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Well, we'll bow before the Lord in prayer just at this point and seek his help and his blessing as we turn to his Word. Let's all still ourselves taking these moments just to prepare our minds and our hearts to receive the Word, to hear God's message and let us seek him together now.

Our God and our Father in heaven, we come to thee and we draw nigh to thy throne of grace in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that as we turn to the Scriptures again, to the message of the Lord for this occasion that thou wilt draw nigh to us, thou wilt bless our waiting hearts, thou wilt speak to us powerfully from thy divine truth. Meet with us now we ask, oh God, and give us help from heaven. May every soul hear thy Word and every heart be touched for we pray this in Jesus' name and for his eternal praise. Amen.

And we turn today to Matthew 21, Matthew's gospel chapter 21 to read from verse 23 down to the 32nd verse. Matthew 21 and verse number 23.

So let's open our Bibles and let us read together God's truth.

And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority? And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second,

and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.¹

And we know that God will bless the reading of his Word to our hearts.

In verse 30 at the end of that verse we have these words, “And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.”²

Now, Matthew’s gospel records a number of parables that are not found in the other gospels and this parable before us today is one of them, the parable of the two sons. Furthermore, in some of these parables that are unique to Matthew, those who are being addressed are specifically the Jewish religious leaders which is the case in this parable that we have read just now.

The time when this parable was spoken was the day after that the Lord had ridden into Jerusalem on the colt, when he was surrounded by the crowds of people as they cried, “Hosanna.”³

And upon entering the Lord’s house on that occasion you will remember as it says in the earlier part of this chapter he cleansed the temple from all the corruption that was found there. And then on entering the temple on the following day he was challenged. He was confronted about his action, among other things, of cleansing the temple and especially on the issue of the authority by which he had acted on that occasion that day before when he purged the temple.

The challenge put to the Lord was in the form of a question. “By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?”⁴

Now this question about the authority with which the Lord had acted was essentially a refusal to acknowledge that his ministry had already displayed an authority that was from heaven and was the clear signal, therefore, that he was none other than the Messiah long promised in the Old Testament Scriptures.

It was for this reason that our Lord, as he responds to the question, speaks directly of the ministry of John the Baptist asking them whether John’s ministry was from heaven or was merely of man. The Lord’s point was clear, you see. The ministry of John the Baptist did display all the evidence of being from heaven. It displayed the fact that he

¹ Matthew 21:23-32.

² Matthew 21:30.

³ Matthew 21:9, 15.

⁴ Matthew 21:23.

was the forerunner of the Messiah. He was a true prophet as he claimed to be and he was the forerunner of the Messiah. And this fact the Jewish leaders could not deny. That is, they knew John was a prophet. They knew his ministry was not of men. They knew it was a ministry with the stamp of God upon it.

And, therefore, since John the Baptist in his ministry that was from heaven, that was verified to be of God had identified and acclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the true Messiah, a stand that was then verified by the Lord's own ministry in terms of what he taught and, as well, by his miracles, then the religious leaders had their question answered, that is the authority with which Christ conducted his ministry was from heaven and was not of men as had been signaled through his forerunner, John the Baptist.

But with all that proof of the Lord's ministry being from heaven and not of men, with all the evidence that was set before these men, these Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus of Nazareth and that is the very point that this parable that we look at today is actually addressing.

Notice with me in the Lord's application of this parable his exposure of these religious leaders, their failure in a spiritual sense, the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, all of them put together. He exposes their failure. Look at verse 31 part b. He says, "Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you."⁵

Now the Lord could not have employed stronger language than that, more condemnatory language than what we have at the end of verse 31. Because he is essentially saying that the very people whom the chief priests and the elders and the scribes and the Pharisees would have regarded as being the very scum of society were already in the kingdom of God, many of them already in the kingdom of God while they themselves were still outside. And that's the point. That is at the very heart of this parable.

Look at those words again at the end of verse 31. "The harlots go into the kingdom of God before you."⁶

The parable's central focus, itself it is a parable, is on the two sons of the owner of a vineyard who were commanded by their father to work in the vineyard. The first son represents the publicans and the harlots indicated by the answer that the first son gives in that part of the parable.

Look at verse 29. It says, "He answered and said, I will not."⁷

Now, as you read there in your English Bible you can see how abrupt those words are. And even in the original text, the Greek text it is even more abrupt. It is very rude. It is

⁵ Matthew 21:31.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Matthew 21:29.

very abrupt. It is very coarse. It is typical of the kind of people that the publicans and the prostitutes were.

And yet it goes on to say this in verse 29. “Afterward he repented, and went.”⁸

The first son represents these publicans and these sinners, these harlots, these fallen women. They have said at first, “No, I will not go in,” and then they repented. And, of course, they repented under the power of the Holy Spirit. And they went into the kingdom of God. The first son, therefore, represents these who were fallen, who were wicked, who were sinful in that very vile and terrible sense. And yet they repented and they went in. The words indicate a true work of grace done in their hearts, the hearts of these deep dyed sinners. They experienced a marvelous work of grace. They went into the kingdom of God and yet the Pharisees stand outside and they are represented by the second son in the little parable taking the parable itself.

Look at verse 30 and notice what it says? “And he came to the second, and said likewise.”⁹ He said, “Go work today in my vineyard,” in other words. “And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.”¹⁰

Religious people are in view under the second son. The ones who said, “I go sir” and went not. Religious people who say much, but fail all together to deliver, that is the sense of these words. They are, therefore, a most accurate and a most vivid portrayal of the religious leaders with whom the Lord was dealing that day right there in the temple. These religious leaders who have much to say, much to claim, much to project about themselves and yet they did absolutely nothing about the true gospel and about the one and only way of salvation. They said, “I go, sir,” but did not go.

They are, therefore, representative of many who still gather in the assemblies of the Church of Jesus Christ who are guilty of the very same response and the very same attitude that we find displayed by these religious leaders in those days, the religious crowd, the leaders. Not only the leaders, but those who followed them, multitudes of people who were very religious associated with the Jewish Church who were continually saying things that sounded good but went no farther than that.

And I have already indicated they are representative of many who are still within the visible church of the 21st century, many people who are religious—if you could use that word—who are associated with the Church of God in an outward sense who may even go farther than that, as we will see today, but that is all that it is. Who will say like the second son, “I go sir,” but do not really go. They do not know anything, really, of what salvation actually is. That is what the parable is all about.

Let us look at that line of thought as we have it brought before us here in these words, “I go, sir: and went not.”¹¹ And we will examine these words from three angles. First of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Matthew 21:30.

¹⁰ Ibid.

all, there is here a declaration because in the words of the second son there is a declaration being made, “I go sir.” It is a declaration of intent. He declares that he is going to the vineyard and his declaration is made in very precise terms. And this is actually remarkable when you start to look at it.

Notice that the word “go” in this verse where he speaks, verse 30, it is in italics. Can you see that? Look at your Bible and see that. “He answered and said, I go,”¹² but the word “go” is in italics. So what he actually said was—the word “go” supplied by the translators of our King James just to give the sense and, of course, the sense is right—but take the word out and just read it as it stands in the original text and it reads this way. When he was commanded to go, when this father came to the second son and said, “Son, go work today in my vineyard,” he responded immediately, “I, sir...” And you can see his hand go up and you can hear him responding.

Very willingly, very cheerfully he is indicating that he is going to go promptly. And he is very respectful because he does something that the other son did not do. He simply said, “I won’t go,” and then he repented. But this fellow, he says, “I, sir...” He is very respectful as well as willing and indicating that he is prompt.

What he is really saying is this. “If you can’t count on anybody else, you can count me. I, sir, I am going and I am going gladly and willingly and I am going with great respect.”

His declaration is representative of many who give an outward, nominal consent to the gospel, but who go no farther and never actually enter into the kingdom of God. You see, in this declaration there is the matter of principle.

Look with me at this and notice what the parable reveals to us in the outcome of the parable. There is a matter of principle in this declaration. It is a declaration signifying intent to go into the vineyard. He says, “I go, sir. I am going into the vineyard.” But the vineyard represents the kingdom of God.

Verse 31. Bring it all together. Verse 31 says, at the end of the verse, again, “The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.”¹³ So it is very obvious that the vineyard is symbolic of the kingdom of God. We cannot fail to see that. It is there. It is plain. It is obvious to anyone who reads the parable. The vineyard speaks of the kingdom of God.

And, therefore, this declaration, “I go, sir,” or “I, sir,” is a declaration concerning the principle that is tied up in the whole matter of the kingdom of God. And this man represents those who, when they declare on hearing the gospel, “I am going to go. I am going to turn to Christ. I am going to repent of my sin. I am going to seek the Lord.” It is representative of these people who make that kind of a declaration and they are confessing that everything about the gospel and everything about the kingdom of God is

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Matthew 21:31.

true. It is right. It is proper. That is what they are declaring. It is a matter of principle that everything about the gospel is true.

In other words, I am speaking of people and I am speaking of some of you and you would say today, “Yes. Everything about God’s vineyard, God’s kingdom is true. It is right. It is proper. It is scriptural.” You would say, “I don’t deny any of those truths. I believe them in my head. I understand them and I declare before God today that it is all true and it is all orthodox.”

Now, therefore, you are making a declaration in which there is a matter of principle that is the principle that the gospel is true and the kingdom of God is true, but the problem is you are not in it. And though you may declare with all your soul this matter of principle that all these things are right and proper and true concerning the kingdom of God, it doesn’t amount to anything when these words, these other words are true of you. You may say, “I go, sir,” but you have never gone. You have never entered in. You have never really become part of the kingdom of God and, therefore, while you may know the truth to be true and orthodox, without entering in there is no hope for your soul.

Take the kingdom of God. Very quickly think about the kingdom of God. As I say, it is represented by this vineyard. And think of the entrance to the kingdom of God. And the entrance to the kingdom of God is by the new birth only, only by the new birth. And when this man says, “I go, sir,” just as people today will say, “The gospel is true. Christ is right. The kingdom of God is reality.” What you are declaring is this matter of principle that the only way into that kingdom is by being born again because our Lord tells us that in very clear and uncertain terms. He says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”¹⁴ And then he beefed it up and he said, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”¹⁵ And then he said, “Ye must be born again.”¹⁶

And there are folks sitting before me today who if they were challenged about the kingdom of God would say, “Yes. I would never deny this that the only entrance into the kingdom of God is through the new birth.”

Furthermore, in this matter of principle take the essence of the kingdom of God. And the essence of the kingdom of God is that it is entirely spiritual. The Lord teaches that through the apostle Paul. “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”¹⁷ It is a spiritual kingdom. It is not worldly. It is not political. It is not earthly. It is not a human organization. It wasn’t invented by man. It wasn’t established by the church. The kingdom of God is spiritual in essence.

¹⁴ John 3:3.

¹⁵ John 3:5.

¹⁶ John 3:7.

¹⁷ Romans 14:17.

And, again, you would assent to that, wouldn't you? You would say, "Yes, that is right and I believe that and I am headed toward that kingdom."

But, my friend, you are not in it. You may agree that it is spiritual in essence, but why are you still outside? That is what the Lord is saying to you today.

"I go, sir," but he went not.

Then take the entrance to the kingdom of God. Those who actually go in, who are they? Who are those who truly enter the kingdom of God? Look at Mark chapter one and you will see it there in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I just leave before you these little points of truth concerning the kingdom of God and this matter of principle that is under this declaration, "I go, sir."

Turn to Mark chapter one verse 14 and there you read these words.

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: [now listen to these words] repent ye, and believe the gospel.¹⁸

Do you see this? The kingdom of God is at hand and those who go into it, the entrance of it, are those who repent and believe the gospel.

What about the expectation concerning the kingdom of God? What is the future of it? What is the eventual, the ultimate form of that kingdom? Well, look with me at 2 Peter chapter one and the verses 11 and 12. And here you have another aspect of this kingdom. You have, as I say, the expectation concerning this kingdom. And it says in 2 Peter one verse 11, "For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."¹⁹

What is the expectation concerning this kingdom? It will never end. It is the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a kingdom that will never fail. All earthly kingdoms will. They will pass away one by one. And at the end of time they will all be banished. But here is a kingdom of which there shall be no end. And all of these little details, men and women they are all part of this matter of principle concerning which a man is declaring, "I believe all that," when he says, in response to the gospel, "I'll go. I'll go in. I'll get saved. I will seek the Lord." You are actually declaring all this to be true, just taking the kingdom of God only in our consideration of these verses today.

But with all your declared agreement with all these truths, you never have pursued the matter of a place in that kingdom.

¹⁸ Mark 1:14-15.

¹⁹ 2 Peter 1:11.

Again, I want you to turn to another Scripture here before we move on, Luke 13. Look at it. Luke 13 verse 24.

Now do you realize what I am saying to you in this gathering today? You who would say, “Yes, we believe all this about the kingdom of God, this matter of principle, it is all true. It is all very scriptural. We can’t deny it. We believe it with all our hearts,” but you don’t really because you have never pursued having a place in the kingdom.

So look at Luke 13 verse 24.

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.²⁰

Now remember something. These words are not addressed to the world in general, to the corrupt, fallen hordes of men. These words are addressed to and about the religious crowd, those who say they believe all these things. But the Lord is telling us a day will come when they will actually, as it were, go to the door of heaven and knock and ask for a place and say, “Let us in.”

But go on to see what it says, not only verse 27, but verse 28. “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.”²¹

It is no good, my friend, to make a declaration like this, “I go, sir,” and in doing so declare a matter of principle that is that all that the Bible teaches about the kingdom of God is true. And we have looked at some of those details about it. It is all true. And yet you remain outside. No matter what you say you are still not in and you are not even seeking a place in the kingdom of God.

This is for you, friend. God is speaking to your heart today.

As we look at this declaration there is a matter of principle, but in this declaration there is a matter of profession as well. For the words are, “I go,” or “I, sir.” And that, essentially, is a profession of going forward into the vineyard.

You see, those words can be read this way, “I am going.” It is in the present tense. So he professes to his father in the parable, “I am going, sir. I am on my way, actually. Right

²⁰ Luke 13:24-27.

²¹ Luke 13:28.

now as you speak I am going forward to the gate of the vineyard and about to enter in. I am on my way.”

He is professing of going forward, of being associated with it and yet that is all that it is. It is a mere profession because the verse goes on to say, “And went not. And went not.”²²

What do we see? What is the problem here? The profession is not followed by perseverance.

Now I want you to think about that statement. The profession is not followed by perseverance. The Bible teaches the perseverance of the saints. It teaches that God’s people persevere in holiness and in godliness and in righteousness. And, you see, the kingdom of God is a kingdom of that kind. It is a kingdom of holiness. It is a kingdom of righteousness. And when a man says, concerning God’s kingdom, “I go,” he is professing, he is in his declaration professing that he is going to pursue that path of sanctification or true holiness of life. And yet this parable reminds us that no matter what many, many people profess they do not go. They say, “I go. I am going. I am part of the kingdom. I belong to it.” But the Lord says, “They went not.”

What is he really saying? He is really saying that they remain where they always were. They remain as a part of that which is really the corrupt world system, one way or the other. They remain there. They may profess to be part of the kingdom and profess even to be in the kingdom, but the Lord says, “They went not.”

What is he saying? I really put it to you. He is saying they have none of the marks of the perseverance of the saints, none of the marks of real holiness and true godliness in their lives, in their character, in their walk, in their behavior and especially within their hearts.

What should be true of a person who truly follows through a profession of belonging to the Lord? What should be true of that person? Well, many things. But here is the chief thing: the evidence of a heart that has been renewed by the Holy Spirit of God and the evidence of such a heart is the demonstration in one’s life not of religious works, not of legally speaking following a set of rules, but rather a true walk with God a love for the Lord, a desire for fellowship with the Lord, an appetite to know the Lord even more, to sit down with the Lord and talk with the Lord every day and read his Word and hear from heaven and, therefore, enter into fellowship with him. Furthermore, there will be a humble, a godly spirit and there will be an attitude that is becoming of someone who doesn’t merely make a profession and goes no farther, but as the coming of the person who is actually right in the kingdom.

Because, my friend, when you are in the kingdom of God there will be the evidence that you are there and you need to think about that very, very carefully.

Is there this that I have just mentioned? Is there the evidence of a work of the Spirit in your heart, in your life?

²² Matthew 21:30.

Please turn with me to Romans eight. Look at verse nine. “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you”²³ Romans eight verse nine. “Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”²⁴

Do you see what that verse is teaching? That only those who have the indwelling spirit are they who are no longer in the flesh. That means unsaved, outside the kingdom of God, still part of the old fallen world system. It is only those who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. And the Bible here says so clearly, “If a man does not have the Spirit of God and of Christ he doesn’t belong to the Lord.”

And this is a very serious thing because our Lord is dealing here in this parable with this very matter. Making a declaration, “I go,” but, as we have seen here, in that declaration there is a matter of principle. It all has to do with God’s kingdom and what it is. And there are many who say, concerning God’s kingdom, “Yes, it is all true,” but they are not inside. And, furthermore, in their declaration there is a matter of profession. They are saying, “Yes, that is where we are. We have come to the kingdom. We are in the kingdom.” But the Lord says, “They went not.” They made their profession, but they go no farther.

I am going to ask you a very searching question. Are you going on with God on the basis of what you have professed to be? You have declared, “I go. I am in.” But, my dear friend, the Lord tells us here many make that claim and that declaration and go nowhere. That is a terrible thing. And I say this in love for your soul today. Do not, do not rest for eternity on a mere profession that has not been followed by the evidence of the work of God the Holy Spirit because where there is the Spirit of God...

²³ Romans 8:9.

²⁴ Ibid.