

## Faith In Action.

Text: Matt 21:28-32

1) The First Son

Suggested Hymns:

2) The Second Son

321, 330, 324, 320, 368

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 21:28-32, <sup>28</sup> *“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’* <sup>29</sup> *“He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went.*

<sup>30</sup> *“Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.* <sup>31</sup> *“Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said to Him, “The first.”*

*Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.* <sup>32</sup> *“For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward [repent] and believe him. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

No prisoner, brought into court, wants to testify against himself or his own cause. But in the cross-examination clever lawyers often surprise those on the witness stand into giving evidence which will be used against them. Admissions which people are surprised into are often quite revealing and sometimes incriminating.

You may recall that the Prophet Nathan was sent by the Lord to King David in order to lead David to repentance.<sup>1</sup> By means of a parable Nathan brought home to David his double crime of adultery and murder and caused the king to pronounce the sentence of death on himself.

Also by a sort of dramatic parable the widow of Tekoa induced David to bring back his banished son Absalom.<sup>2</sup>

In like manner the simple Parable of the Unequal Sons is masterful and very practical. It speaks of the attitude of two sons toward their father's command to go and work, but the whole matter is also very directly applied to each one of us.

Jesus Christ Himself, our only Advocate before the throne of Divine Justice, leads us to see our shortcomings that we may repent, be pardoned, and change. Today we learn about *Faith in Action*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

## **1. The First Son**

### **Faith In Action**

The first thing we notice in our text is that it was the father who went to his sons and not the other way around. God always takes the initiative in His relationship with us. What we say and what we do is always a response to what God has said and done.

There is a note of urgency in the father's words, "Son, go and work *today*." this is an echo of the psalmist's warning, "*Today, if you will hear His voice: <sup>8</sup> 'Do not harden your hearts.'*"<sup>3</sup>

So our text begins, *A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.'* The father of the parable is, of course, God Himself. It is our Father in heaven. He says to all who are His children, "*Go, work today in my vineyard.*"

Our Father has Himself worked from before the beginning of time. Jesus says in John 5:17, "*My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.*" In six days He created heaven and earth, and what a gigantic work it was!

But no greater is the fashioning of light and darkness, the ordering of the stars, and the laying of the foundations of the world than the divine work of creating a clean heart in a sinner.

Whatever the nature of His work, our heavenly Father needs no help. We read in Isaiah 40:14, <sup>14</sup> *With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, And taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, And showed Him the way of understanding?* The answer is, of course, nobody.

Likewise we read in Romans 11:35, <sup>35</sup> *“Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?”* The Psalmist writes, *“Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.”*<sup>4</sup>

But the Master Workman, the Architect of the Universe, the Chemist of Creation, the Engineer of the Earth, who holds the waters of the great oceans in the palm of His hand, has asked us to work with Him, to be His helpers.

He has given us a part in tilling the soil so that He may bring forth a bountiful supply of grain for our daily bread. He has appointed herdsmen, so that the cattle upon a thousand hills might be for meat upon our tables.

Us Christians He has called to be His co-workers in His Kingdom of Grace. What a rare privilege! What a distinction! In His vineyard we are to grow not grapes and figs, but to nurse the immortal souls of children, who are like tender vines around our tables.

In His vineyard we are not to fish in streams and lakes, but we are to be fishers of men. Not only are we to read the book of nature and the Bible, but we ourselves are to be living epistles which all people may read. We are to be ambassadors of the Most High and proclaim the good news of man’s salvation.

We, who were once turned out of the Garden of Eden, are called into the Lord’s vineyard to tend fruit more precious than that which grew in *“Paradise Lost.”* “Son, daughter,” says the Lord, *“go and work in My vineyard.”*

We are redeemed to work. The yoke of the Lord is easy and His burden is light, but it is a yoke, and there is work to be done. God says through St. Paul, *“Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”*<sup>5</sup>

We are, of course, not to attempt to work off the debt of our sins or seek to obtain salvation by our works. Nobody can do that.

Thy hymnist writes,<sup>6</sup>

Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears for ever flow,  
All for sin could not atone:  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Our salvation, moreover, was completed once for all by Christ when He died on the Cross. It is perfect beyond our power to add anything whatsoever. Let us rejoice in it, and give all glory for it to the Saviour alone.

Nor can anyone co-operate in his conversion. Natural man is dead in trespasses and sins. He is spiritually blind and receives not the things of the Spirit of God. Furthermore, the carnal mind is at enmity against God. Before conversion no one can work in the Lord's vineyard.

It is impossible for the dead to stir, for the blind to see, for enemies of God to engage in works prompted by love of Him, until they are regenerated.

But since by faith in Christ, our Redeemer's blood, we have been born again, we can go and work. We can please God. We can wait on our Lord by serving our fellow men, especially our fellow Christians. We can by word and deed praise God. Faith works by love. Such a faith our heavenly Father gave us through His Holy Spirit, and He wants to see that faith in action.

The first son's reply is abrupt and disrespectful. He answers, "***I will not,***" and for some time he persists in his disobedience. Likewise, many people who are asked to work in the Christian Church, the Father's vineyard here on earth, answer, "***I will not.***"

Like the tax-collectors and harlots they much prefer to do works of darkness. So they impudently decline the invitation and disobey the command to work.

Or they are selfishly so interested in building their own barns and in hoarding that they do not even acknowledge the bountiful blessings of God, much less bring thank-offerings of good works and financial contributions. In many instances those who say, "***I will not,***" have been abundantly blessed with talents with which to serve.

Disobedient people do not always openly proclaim their unwillingness. Many a light is quietly placed under a bushel; many a talent is silently wrapped in a napkin and buried in a hole in the ground. Many people simply side-step their responsibilities.

They just ignore the work of the vineyard they ought to do. They neglect both the Vine and the branches, both the Lord and His members. They do not

prune the branches of the Vine, nor do they graft in new ones; but while they are taking their ease, the little foxes are destroying the precious vines.

Finally, however, as in the case of the first son of the story, some repent of their idleness and of their wilful disobedience. They are born again of the Spirit of God. They come into the Church Invisible perhaps very late in life, but now they begin to work in the vineyard of the Father.

A tax collector becomes a Gospel writer, a persecutor becomes an Apostle, and a chief tax-collector of small stature does champion service for the Master.<sup>7</sup> Often such people work with the zeal of “first love” and outstrip those who have been working in the vineyard for a long time.

They glory in the light, like a man who has been blind for years. They notice every detail of the beauty of the vineyard. They are interested in both the large and in the little clusters. They use their tongues and hands like those who, dumb or paralysed for many years, have suddenly recovered speech or feeling.

They appreciate their freedom all the more and work all the harder now that they have escaped the horrors of imprisonment. By repentance and faith they have risen from the dead. Their new-born faith becomes manifest in action.

## 2. The Second Son

Our text continues,<sup>30</sup> *“Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. Of such people the Lord says in Matthew 15:8, <sup>8</sup> ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.*

As you can see, the second son is much more respectful than his brother. In effect he said, “Yes, sir! Right away, sir!” But his inactivity spoke louder than his enthusiastic words. It is significant that the Greek word for “sir” is the same word that is also translated “Lord.”

This reminds us of Jesus’ words in His Sermon on the Mount,<sup>21</sup> *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”<sup>8</sup> Their words are correct, and decidedly so. This son says to his father in a most polite and respectful manner, ‘I go, sir.’*

There are many people who make a fine profession of faith. When in Holy Baptism the Father says, “*Come,*” they say, “*I come.*” When the Father says, “*Will you?*” in Confirmation, they say, “*We will, with the help of God,*” but afterwards they refuse the help of God and do nothing.

Such sons and daughters our good Lord refers to also in the Parable of the Foolish Builders. He says that if any man would build a tower, let him first sit down and consider the cost. Otherwise, having started to build his tower and then having run out of enthusiasm or of funds or of material, his unfinished tower stands as a monument to his folly.<sup>9</sup>

A person who professes to be a Christian and yet is not active in the Lord’s kingdom is like a man who has started something he cannot finish. Many a person professes, “*I believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed me ... that I may live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity,*” but actually he doesn’t live under Him nor serve Him in His kingdom. Such a faith is inactive, dead, and useless.

Our heavenly Father is the unseen witness of every vow we make. He remembers perfectly our every promise. In Holy Baptism we vow to be God’s loving children. We dare not forget this vow.

At the time of our Confirmation we renewed this vow and promised God that with His help we would live a holy life. Now, this is a very practical matter. A promise made is a debt unpaid.

If we do not continue in prayer to God to help us keep these vows, then we are not keeping the faith that we once professed. To the extent of our neglect we are similar to the second son, who said, “*I go, sir, ’ but he did not go.*”

Christ has said concerning the Last Supper, “*This do in remembrance of Me.*” So we must do it in remembrance of Him. He says,<sup>38</sup> “*Give, and it will be given to you.*”<sup>10</sup> So if we would receive we must not harden our hearts, but preserve a tender heart of charity.

God says that we should hear and heed His Word, and we cannot expect to have courage in danger, to know the truth, to be filled with peace in our hearts unless we continue to hear His Word. All these promises are conditioned upon our obedience to His commands.

To lead a godly life of obedience to God's will we need to pray God to *"break and hinder every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow God's name nor let His kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh."*<sup>11</sup>

Just watch the next time you say, in effect, *"I go,"* but you do not go, and see if it is not because the old evil Foe tempts you to act contrary to what God has commanded you, or because the world does not want you to live as Jesus asks you to live, or because your own heart lusts after evil things and sets its affection on the things of this earth. May our Father in heaven keep us steadfast in His Word and faith against this triple alliance of evil.

Jesus asks in our text, <sup>31</sup> *"Which of the two did the will of his father?"* His audience answered correctly, *"The first."* Although the first one had bluntly refused at first, afterward he repented and went.

Jesus explains just what He means by this parable. *Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. <sup>32</sup> "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward [repent] and believe him.*

The answer involves obedience or "doing," but it is not a doing that is divorced from faith. Jesus commends the tax collectors and harlots for *believing* the preaching of John the Baptist, but Jesus condemns His adversaries because they *did not repent and believe*.

The distinction between repentance and believing is simply that repentance stresses turning away from sin, and believing stresses turning toward God. Both are acts of faith. As Martin Luther says, faith is *"a living, busy, active, mighty thing."*

So we can see that Jesus places the emphasis on faith. They all heard John preach, *"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*<sup>12</sup> He proclaimed that those who are righteous before God are those who believe in the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. The Pharisees rejected John's Gospel message; but the tax-collectors and the harlots believed it and went into the Kingdom of God. This the Pharisees saw, and yet declined to turn to Jesus as their Saviour.

Is it not evident, then, that those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ are the ones who do the Father's will? And they, only they, walk in newness of life.

Let us have love, but first there must be faith, from which it springs. Let us have action, but first there must be the agent, faith. Let us have good fruit, but first there must be the good tree of faith to bring it forth.

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,<sup>13</sup>

To Thee, O Lord, in faith we cling,  
We love and trust Thee truly,  
And from this faith good works shall spring  
That serve our neighbour duly.  
'Tis faith alone that justifies;  
The works that from such faith arise  
Reveal that it is living. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Sam 12:1-9

<sup>2</sup> 2 Sam. 14:1-24

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 95:7-8, see also Hebrews 3:7-4:11

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 115:3

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 15:58

<sup>6</sup> Hymn 330

<sup>7</sup> Zacchaeus

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 7:21

<sup>9</sup> Luke 14:28

<sup>10</sup> Luke 6:38

<sup>11</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*, The Lord's Prayer, Third Petition.

<sup>12</sup> John 1:29

<sup>13</sup> Hymn 324