

The Parable of the Two Sons

1. Read the Parable of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32). What is happening here? Who is Jesus telling this parable to?

Jesus is in Jerusalem teaching in the temple courts a few days before Passover (Matt 21:1-11) and His crucifixion. While Jesus is teaching, the chief priests and elders question His authority (Matt 21:23-27). In response, Jesus raises the question of their competence to judge such an issue.

It is in this atmosphere of controversy that Jesus tells the first of three consecutive parables to Jewish religious leaders.

2. Examine the two sons and their actions. Understanding the story will help one discern the lesson more accurately.

Son	Answer	Repented?	Worked the field?	Reflection of son's heart
First	I will not (truthful)	Yes	Yes	Obedied his father
Second	I will (deceitful)	No	No	Disobeyed his father

3. What was Jesus' explanation of the parable? What is the lesson? What do we learn about the kingdom of God?

Directed towards Jewish religious leaders, Jesus' question, "which of the two did the will of the father?" placed the point of comparison on obedience. This sets up the parable to rebuke the Jewish religious leaders.

The parable is constructed in such a fashion that it is obvious which son was obedient, and Jewish religious leaders answer accordingly without realizing the admission of their offense. The lesson of the parable is hidden behind the indignation directed towards the disobedient son.

This approach of convicting one of sin through a story that generates an indignant response towards the disobedient is similar to another biblical example where the prophet Nathan convicts David of his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1-12).

Jesus' statement that "tax collectors and prostitutes" will enter the kingdom of God before Jewish religious leaders is a stinging rebuke as Jews who worked in either vocation were viewed with distain in Jewish society. Jesus could not have chosen a more offensive comparison. Furthermore, the Greek verb for the phrase "are entering... ahead of you" has the force of "and you do not."

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Jesus' statement is shocking. The lower classed sinners, such as tax collectors and prostitutes who once said no to God, heard the Good News, repented, changed their sinful ways and were obedient to God's will for them (Luke 7:29). These people enter the kingdom of God, and this response was represented by the first son.

In contrast, Jesus charged the religious Jewish leaders as saying yes to God, but never doing what God wanted; their pious righteousness did not grant them entrance into the kingdom of God. This response was represented by the second son whom they saw as disobedient.

The Parable of the Two Sons is linked to the preceding verses about the question of authority (Matt 21:23-27), which established the importance of John the Baptist. John the Baptist spoke of the Good News of the kingdom of God which enabled sinners the means to enter and obligated them to ethical reforms with the imminent approach of the kingdom.

But Jewish religious leaders did not believe John the Baptist's message, did not repent and disobeyed God's will (Luke 7:30).

Not only did the Jewish religious leaders reject the message of John the Baptist and his example of righteousness, they refused to acknowledge the changes they observed in the repentant especially the despised of Jewish society. Jesus' rebuke went beyond the parable; it included their failures in discernment and judgment.

Jewish religious leaders viewed both John the Baptist with childish foolishness. In Luke, Jesus compares Jewish religious leaders as "children sitting in the marketplace (Luke 7:31-35). When playing happy or sad music, children want other kids to play along; however, if they refuse, the children become irritated and annoyed. In like fashion, when John and Jesus confront Jewish religious leaders and refuse to play their "games", they are the object of taunts and criticism.

The kingdom of God is open to all who repent. True repentance is exhibited by obedience, and judging by the lives of the apostles, righteousness in the kingdom of God can be measured in terms of obedience.

References:

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