

Pentecost 18 –October 1, 2023
Text: Matthew 21:23–32
Theme: A Tale of Two Sons

I do not like it when people say yes and then do not do what they promised to do. It drives me to distraction. I used to tell my kids, “Don’t lie to me. If you’re not going to do it, tell me now.” That’s the point Jesus is dealing with in our Gospel for today. There are two sons, sort of like there are two types of people with whom Jesus is dealing. There are the so-called “good people” who have high places in society and keep all the social and moral laws. But, in secret, they live sinfully debaucherous lives. They don’t think they need any help with their sin because it is secret and hidden. And then there are the others, the people society looks upon as “bad people.” They are the prostitutes, the tax-collectors, the lepers, and of course the Samaritans. They are humble because they are only too aware of their sin and how much they need help. The “good people” in the Gospel for today wanted to know by what authority Jesus was doing and saying what he was doing and saying. The “bad people” were just thrilled that He was doing it and saying it.

Turns out the “good people” were not nearly as good as they thought and they went away unforgiven because they believed they could be righteous by themselves. The “bad people” were the ones hungry to receive the gift of salvation and they were forgiven. We

become quickly confused over those words good and bad. Remember the book, "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" It was written by a well-meaning pastor who wanted to help people overcome sorrow and grief but it begins with a false premise. We are not good people by nature. By nature, we are all bad people. Jesus tells the parable of the two sons and both sons in the parable are bad. One is disrespectful and the other lies. What makes us good is nothing within us, rather, it is something that comes into us from the outside. Something changed the bad son's mind. He had been disrespectful and refused to do his father's bidding, but something changed and he repented, that is, he turned around and did what he was asked.

We pray in the collect of the day: "Enlighten our minds by Your Holy Spirit that, confessing Jesus as Lord, we may be led into all truth..." Something has to change in us for us to do good. God has to come into us first. He enters us through His Word, through Holy Baptism and through the Lord's Supper and creates and strengthens faith in us. Once faith is created and strengthened, then we have the power to believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and suffered Hell to pay for our sins. That is what makes us "good." Everyone who has faith and so believes that Jesus is our Savior is "good." It has never been based on your action or lack of action. How could it

be? Without God first creating faith in us, we are incapable of doing anything truly good. It goes all the way back to Cain and Able. Cain thought that he was good because he had worked so hard and that Able being favored over him was unfair. So, he killed Able. Another human being's relationship with God has nothing to do with us. Our relationship with God is strengthened by His Word and Sacrament and nothing we do can improve on that.

That's why the catechism is so careful in its definition of a good work to add the words "flow from faith." The catechism asks, "What are good works in God's sight?" And the answer is "Our activities and works are good in God's sight when they flow from faith in Christ as children of God and they are carried out within our callings according to the Ten Commandments." Whatever flows from faith is a good work and nothing done outside of faith can ever be good in God's eyes no matter what civil good it might accomplish. The person who has faith and is functioning in his or her God given role, does a good work that is pleasing to God in whatever they do, whether that is making dinner for the family, mowing the lawn, or working in an office. The person without faith can feed 5,000 homeless people and accomplish nothing good in God's eyes.

In our Introit for today, we said: "The LORD lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground." That about sums it up.

The good son is the humble son who receives the gift of faith from God and acts in accordance with that faith. The bad son is wicked, not because of anything he did or didn't do but because he has no faith. There are only two categories: the humble and the wicked. It's a hard truth that Jesus speaks today when He says to the Pharisees,

"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him." That's it, the humble and the wicked. Praise God that He has claimed you as His own and made you His righteous and Holy children. That is the only reason you are good, and you are good no matter how much you fail because God has made you good with His own life and soul.