

“Saying ‘Yes’ And Really Meaning It”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

25 September 2011 + Crosspoint Presbyterian Church

Matthew 21:28-32 + parable of the two sons

The parable of the two sons. When the father came and asked them both to work in the vineyard, the first said “No” but relented and went. The second said “Yes” but did nothing. Who did the will of the father? A simple, straightforward parable, right? Nothing in Jesus’ parables is ever quite that straightforward.

Think back to September 1997. We were all glued to our television sets watching the funerals of two very famous women.



- The first funeral was for Diana, Princess of Wales, who met an untimely death at the age of 36 in a fatal car crash. The Kensington and Buckingham Palaces were surrounded with quite literally tons of flowers. Makeshift shrines appeared all over London. The funeral was a who’s who of celebrities at Westminster Abbey. Elton John’s poignant rendering of his “Candle in the Wind” with Earl Spencer’s tribute to his sister drew

Diana in saintly colors. No one heard even a single word about the late princess’s adulterous affairs, temper tantrums, extravagance or eating disorders.



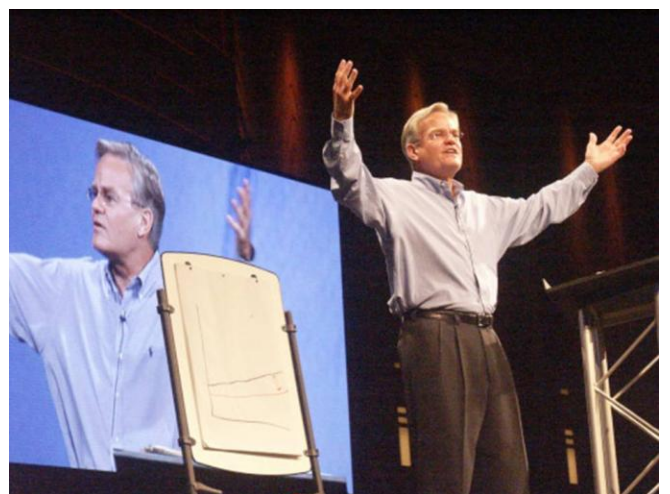
- The second funeral also had us glued to our sets. Mother Theresa died only a few days later. Her funeral contrasted starkly with the spectacle at Westminster. Not laid out in fancy-dress in a royal chapel, but prior to the funeral mass, the nun's body was dressed simply and laid out on a block of ice. While religious and political leaders from around the globe praised Mother Theresa for her compassion and courage, there was no star quality to her funeral mass. The requiem followed the prescribed funeral mass, the same for prince or pauper ~ the same prayers for her soul and petitions for God to have mercy on her and receive her as God's own. Nothing in the liturgy made any special claim of divine favor. It exuded the same spirit as Mother Theresa had had in life ~ humble submission in service to humanity.¹



Think back to those two events, less than a week apart. Our question today is Jesus' question to us:

“Which of the two did the will of the Father?”

While we are on the subject of saintliness, Bill Hybels has demonstrated something interesting about Mother Theresa and other modern saints – the ones who say “yes” to God and follow through with “yes” actions which speak louder than words. Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek mega-church near Chicago, once in Sunday worship had a ladder mounted on the platform extending upwards from the floor to the high rafters. The top was hidden from



view. Hybels then asked the congregation to imagine that this is a ladder of righteousness or holiness.

The members were asked to guess where Christian leaders such as Billy Graham and Mother Theresa would be on the ladder. Responses placed them rather high up. He attached large cards with their names on various rungs. Then the members were asked to imagine where a card with their own name on it would be. To emphasize how low we as individuals would probably be on the ladder, Hybels pointed out that Mother Theresa and Billy Graham would undoubtedly place themselves down low at or near the bottom rung.² How low can you go? Is there a rung lower than the bottom rung?

Mother Theresa, Billy Graham and all other modern saints know well their place in God's story. If these true saints who said "yes" and did "yes" to the Father's commands, if these are on the bottom rung, then where are we? We often find ourselves wanting to say "yes" to God but not always following through with doing and living out our "yes" to God.

Once there were two couples. Couple A was married in a large, beautiful church ceremony. They pledge life-long faithfulness and love to each other in the moving words of their vows. However, their life together has been one of abuse—both physical and verbal. They both have been unfaithful to each other.



Couple B live together. They had no public ceremony. They signed no marriage license. They spoke no vows in the presence of witnesses. However, their life together is a loving and affirming relationship. They have remained faithful to each other.

Our question today is Jesus' question to us:

“Which of the two did the will of the Father?”



Neither really. Both need change of heart—couple A in the way they act towards each other and couple B in their attitudes about the importance of the words in a public ceremony.³

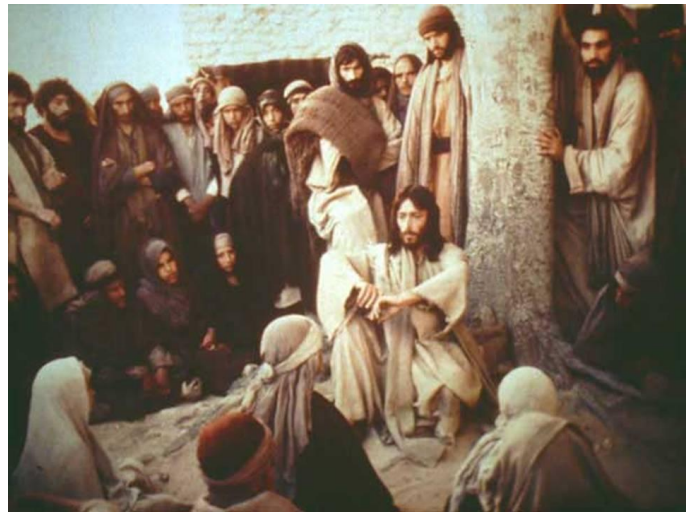
There's that phrase again ~ "change of mind / change of heart". Jesus uses it twice in this short parable. Maybe it's important.

Who then is doing the will of the Father? Jesus asks the question and then thankfully he answers it.

"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you....For you did not change your minds and believe John....but the tax collectors and the prostitutes [did]."

That's just crazy talk. Whores and sinners getting in before the good righteous people? That's preposterous! Jesus has our attention now.

I wonder how many of our congregations, if they did have a former prostitute or thief or traitor as active members, how many of our congregations would have them talk about the transformation that God had effected in their lives? Would they be willing to reveal their sinful pasts? Would they hide those uncomfortable facts in polite society?



Would they still be accepted by others if such things became known?⁴

Admittedly this would be a rare occurrence, seldom seen among us – prostitutes and notorious sinners flocking to the churches. I have heard of it one time. Wes Lackey, the minister who preached at my ordination service to the ministry, was pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas on Cedar Springs Boulevard.

At that time, Cedar Springs down below Love Field was, how shall we say this, the largest “red light” district in Dallas. Wes was one of a number of Southern Baptist ministers in Northern Texas who had switched to serving in Presbyterian Churches for theological and liturgical reasons. Despite this background, he was wont to wear his clergy collar all the time – very rare in laid-back Dallas of that time and even rarer along Cedar Springs.

The congregation was wont to have an afterglow session at a local bar after choir practice every week. Wes would join them complete with clergy collar. Maybe that was the draw, but ladies of the evening and other denizens of the bar scene would come to Wes Lackey and unburden themselves. Undoubtedly each saw a connection to God, sought an opportunity to reconnect, to return. After a time, Wes looked out one Sunday morning and saw the front row of the congregation filled with prostitutes in their Sunday best.

Maybe we are not seeing these very folks flocking into the kingdom today because they don't see signs of the kingdom among us – perhaps because we may not really demonstrate the powerful grace and love of God that can change people.

There's that word again Jesus uses so often: “*change.*”

The ‘change’ word definitely scares us. We are always fearful of it even when it is wrapped up in God's gracious invitation. None of us think that we are the ones saying “yes” to God but failing to follow through. Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher, tells a parable of call and response like unto Jesus' parable of the two sons sent into the vineyard.

Imagine a make believe country populated by ducks and geese. In



this country is a barnyard full of geese. Into this barnyard flies a wild goose, a preacher. He is eloquent. He is charismatic and engaging. He tells the geese in the barnyard that

they were given wings to fly. God intends for them to soar. Their forebears flew across the great skies above, sometimes so thick they hide the sun. He has seen the world outside the barnyard. It is a wide and beautiful world, there is freedom in that world and unimaginable joy.

The geese think he is a wonderful preacher. They nod, say AMEN, applaud this preaching goose. Yet there is one thing they do not do – they do not fly. The barnyard walls are high and secure and the corn is plentiful, so they go back to their old familiar ways.

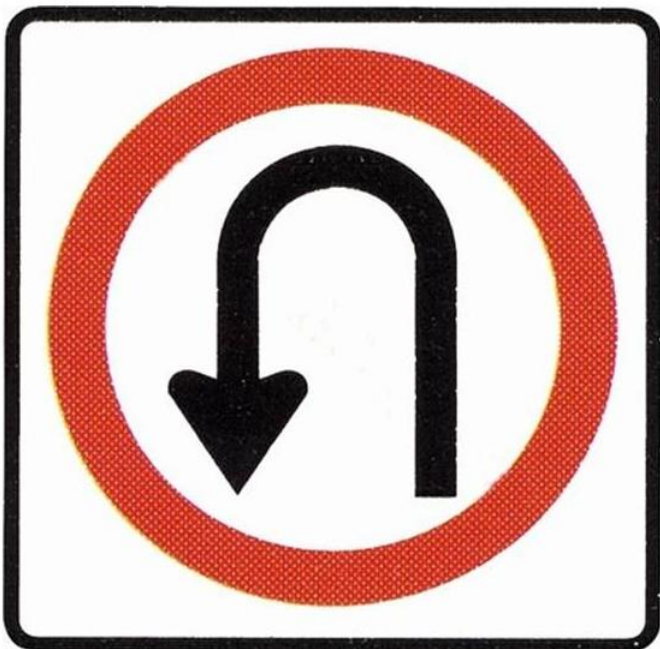
God wants us to fly. God wants us to soar. God wants us to respond to God's invitation.

Jesus' point is that the first son is the one doing the will of the Father – the one who at first said "no" but later "*changed his mind*" and did right as the Father requested. That's a key phrase "*changed his mind / changed her mind*" which Jesus pointedly emphasizes.

That's the Gospel. To enter God's story, to become a part of God's plan, Jesus calls us to a "changed mind," a new way of thinking, a new way of believing. And out of that comes a new way of doing, a new way of acting and most incredibly a

new way of living. There are other words for "changed minds" in the Bible: "repentance," "turning aside," "turning around."

It is about what we really do that matters. Indeed, the crowds bear witness that it is indeed the "tax collector, prostitutes" and other notorious sinners who are responding to the Good News. Saying "no" at first but



doing “yes” in the end – repenting, turning, changing.

It is all about our responses to God’s gracious invitation to become part of the kingdom work in God’s vineyard. God wants us to say “yes” and really mean it. God wants our “yeses” to be real “yeses” and our “noes” to be repented of.



God does indeed invite us.

God wants to redeem us.

God wants to free us.

God wants us be all that we can be.

God wants us say “yes” to God’s gracious invitation to kingdom work.

God wants us to say “yes” and to do “yes” and to live “yes” and to be “yes.”

God wants us to be faith-filled and faithful sons and daughter who rejoice to enter the kingdom.

God wants us to fly.

God wants us to soar.

¹ Carol M. Noren, *Pulpit Resource* 9/22/2002, pp. 50-51

² *Ibid.*, p. 52

³ Brian Stoffregen, < <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/>> “Proper 21 // Lectionary 26 A: Exegetical notes on Matthew 21:23-32”

⁴ Brian Stoffregen, < <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/>> “Proper 21 // Lectionary 26 A: Exegetical notes on Matthew 21:23-32”