

Matthew 21:28-32

Perhaps to some it just doesn't seem right. Several hundred miles away, people are dealing with the effects of hurricanes Katrina and Rita—life-changing events; storms that ripped away at everything in their paths—and here we are listening to a sermon about two sons who disobeyed their father. Not a story that would make headline news. Perhaps a story that doesn't even gain much of our interest. But it should. Because it has everything to do with us. And it has everything to do with those hurricanes; and with the terrorist attacks four years ago; and with the BTK murderer in Wichita, Kansas; and with everything that is wrong with our world. Because these two sons in Jesus' parable spell out for us why bad things happen—why people get sick and die; why people hate each other, and go to war; why natural disasters devastate people's lives.

These two sons disobeyed their father. They opposed his will. The father in the parable is God. And those sons are alive and well—living within us. And because we oppose the will of God, bad things happen. Hurricanes were not a part of God's creative design. Nor was terrorism, or war, or hatred and divorce, sickness and death. All these came into our world because we opposed the will of God. That's called sin, and we all have it and do it.

That first son was a real piece of work, wasn't he? "Go, work in the vineyard today, son," said his father. "No!" he said, "I will not!" That son uttered words of utter rebelliousness right to his father's face. No sneaking around behind his back—right out in public for all to see and hear, especially his father, that son rejected his father's will. "I will not do what you ask," he was saying, "I will live and do as I please. Keep your commands to yourself."

That was the way of the prostitutes and tax collectors, and others in Jesus' day who publicly opposed the will of God. What God commanded they rejected...for all to see. "Do not steal?—I'll steal if I want to." "Do not commit adultery?—I'll live as I please." The words of the first son were on their lips—"I will not do what you ask. Keep your commandments to yourself."

We are the first son whenever we outwardly oppose the will of God. By our words, by our actions, when you and I reject what God commands we are displaying the very same rebelliousness. God says, "Do this," but we say "No!" God says, "Do not do this," but we say, "I most certainly will!"

That first son may well have thought that he had a very good reason for disobeying. He may have been too tired to work in the vineyard, or too busy. But nonetheless, it was still disobedience. We justify our disobedience so well that we don't think we're all that bad in how we act. We know what God commands, but we excuse what we say and do for this, and that reason. But it's still sin—wicked rebelliousness—utter defiance of God's will.

Now that first son had a brother, and when their father said to him, "Go, work in the vineyard today, son," he answered, "I will, sir"—but he did not go. Did he have good intentions? Was he intending on going, but something came up? It doesn't matter. Good intentions count for nothing with God. "I intended to drive the speed limit, officer." "I intended to finish my homework, teacher." It doesn't work with men, and it doesn't work with God. "I intended to go work in the vineyard," does not replace going. "I intended to obey," does not replace obeying. "I intended to believe," does not replace believing. Plain

and simple, that second son was a hypocrite. To say one thing and do another is hypocrisy—good intentions or not.

To pretend to obey and then disobey was the way of the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day. They said all the right things, but did not follow through. They recounted the words of God, but did not act on what God had said. The hypocrisy of the second son lives within us. We say what God wants to hear, when we're here in His House, but then we go out and do the opposite. We promise to be faithful, but we don't follow through. Our words count for nothing when our actions show them to be meaningless.

That father in the parable had some very disobedient sons. I'm sure he was wanting to ask: Do I have any other sons out there? And the answer is...yes. There is one more son. The Son who told the parable. The Son of God, Jesus Christ. When the Father said, "Go," He said, "I will," and He did. No rebelliousness here. No disobedience of any kind. This Son obeyed the Father's voice.

He came to live among us, becoming one of us. He took on our human flesh. This Son obeyed every commandment that the Father had given. And He did this for us. Since the first two sons had disobeyed, the third Son, the Son of God, obeyed in their place...in our place. And since the first two sons had disobeyed, the third son, the Son of God, was killed in their place...in our place. Jesus was punished for our disobedience. The wrath of the Father against the first two sons fell upon the third Son. Jesus endured the Father's anger for us. He suffered hell's agony in our place.

Does that matter? You know, for many people it does not. They live as if there was no third Son—no Son of God who lived, suffered, died, and rose again for them...even though He did. But for you who are baptized into that "third Son," it means everything. It means that even though the first two sons live within you, with all their wickedness and rebelliousness, so does the "third Son." And He, Christ, puts an end to their rule within your heart. Jesus brings you to repent of your sins against God's will, and He leads you into the vineyard where He gives you the cup of forgiveness to drink.

That first son in the parable repented. He changed his mind and went to the vineyard. And that first son is you when, by the grace of God, He brings you to sorrow over your sin so that you believe the words: I forgive you. Why did the father in the parable want his sons to go work in the vineyard? What kind of work did he want them to do?—the work of gathering in the fruit of the vine. You see, that vineyard is the Table of His forgiveness, and with the fruit of the vine Jesus gives you His blood shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins.

The Father does not tell you to go and work in His vineyard so that you may do great things for Him, but so that He may do great things for you. The work He has for you is the work of believing on Him whom He has sent. The work you do is God's great work in you to lead you to faith in Christ; to forgive your sins...your rebelliousness, for the sake of Jesus.

In John 6, Jesus says, "Work for the food that endures to eternal life." That is why the father ordered his two sons into the vineyard—to receive that food which gives life. And that is why God has led you here to His vineyard today—to receive eternal life. Because Jesus is that "food." He is the Water of Life at the baptismal font. He is the Bread of Life

that comes to you in the hearing of His Word. He is your Savior who, with the bread and wine given at His Table, comes to you with His true body and blood to assure you that the Father in heaven is not angry with you because you are forgiven.

“Go, work in the vineyard today, son.” The Heavenly Father has invited you here today, not to work for Him...to usher, or greet, or teach, or sing, or put your money in the offering plate. You will do these things while you are here, but that’s not why you are here. You’re here to reap a harvest of blessings from God—to receive the fruits of faith and forgiveness, life and salvation. You are here in God’s vineyard so that He may work within you, to show you that—yes, you are a disobedient son, but to tell you especially of the “third Son” in the parable. That Son who is your dear Savior, Jesus Christ—who forgives you of every sin, and gives you life in heaven forever. Amen.