

Which Son Are You?

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So, we get some hard words from Jesus this morning, don't we? Hard words because on the one hand, we have the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes who are commended for hearing the truth, for believing it and acting accordingly.

The religious folks end up getting exposed, don't they? They get exposed for their hard-heartedness. They get exposed for their refusal to really repent. They get exposed for their unwillingness to do what God has called them to do.

And all of this while they're hiding behind a religious facade, pretending that they're doing God's will when they're really not. And that hits hard.

It's supposed to. Now, to put the shoe on the other foot for a second, though, it's not hard for us to imagine the Father's frustration. With the second son.

[1:31] The son who answered, I go, sir, but did not go. Now, isn't it frustrating when someone tells you that they're going to do something and then they don't? Ever been there?

You know, I think of this time with one of my best friends who could be like this at times.

One time, I was supposed to be riding with him to a music festival in Cincinnati, Ohio, which was about two and a half hours from where we lived. He told me, I'll be around at eight o'clock in the morning to pick you up and then we'll leave.

Well, nine o'clock rolls around. Finally, he shows up. He says, Oh, wait, man, I have to stop by the campus for a second to do something real quick.

All right. I say, Okay, I figure we will get there. He tells me once we get to the campus that he has a project that he needs to finish.

[2:29] And at this point, I'm getting a little bit frustrated, right? And then we finally get on the road right about the time the music festival that's two and a half hours away is starting for the day.

And then we hear a siren and we see flashing lights. He gets pulled over for speeding. We finally get to the venue just in time to meet another friend who comes up to tell us that the band that I had really wanted to see had just played a great set.

Wasn't too happy about that. Kind of wish my friend hadn't even bothered to tell me that he was going to pick me up at eight. Ever been there? Now, in the parable we have before us this morning, we see a tale of two sons.

And one of the sons does just this sort of thing. We read, A man had two sons and he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today.

And he answered, I will not. But afterward, he changed his mind and he went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir, but did not go.

[3:39] Which of the two did the will of his father? And they said, The first. So what is all this about? Jesus tells us, 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.

Well, that escalated quickly, didn't it? Jesus is talking to religious people here. He's talking to the chief priests. He's talking to the elders.

And what does he have to say to them? Certainly not an attaboy way to go. No. That's not what he says. Here's what he's saying.

You guys are like that second son. You've said all the right things. You've gone through the right motions to convince yourselves that you have obeyed God's law. You've told your father and everyone else who will listen that you are doing the father's will.

[4:51] That you're going to do it. But you haven't. John the Baptist preached to them and they didn't listen. John the Baptist said, Repent.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Repentance. But these religious folks, these religious leaders, didn't listen, did they?

Instead of true repentance, a transformed heart, fruit that is evidence of repentance, evidence of knowing the saving power of God, all they cared about was outward respectability.

A kind of respectable religious observance. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. They made vows. They said all the pious phrases, and it was nothing but empty, worthless garbage.

Then these people, that they held in contempt. Prostitutes. Tax collectors. Sinners. Jesus is saying, Some of these people are like the son who listened.

[5:59] The son who said that he wouldn't do the will of the Father, but then repents and does it. Who turns from disobedience to obedience. Whose disobedience certainly does get the first word, but whose obedience gets the last word.

And Jesus' words are stark here. Those sinners who are like the first son, who repent, will enter, the kingdom of heaven, and he says, before you religious hypocrites who only honor God with your lips. They will have eternal life, and you won't. They have believed, they have repented, they have borne fruit, and you are nothing but whitewashed tombs, who have done nothing more than going through the motions.

Being the son who first disobeyed, and then later obeyed, is better than being the son who said that he would obey, and then disobeyed.

It's better to be called from unfaithfulness to faithfulness, than it is to assume your own faithfulness, while you're actually living with a disobedient heart. And here's the really difficult, painful, tricky thing.

[7:12] It's not hard for me to tell if I'm in open rebellion against God. If, say, I'm a crooked tax collector. I can see that. I can see where I'm in clear violation of God's righteous standard.

I can see that I fall short, that I'm in need of Jesus, that I'm being called to repent. But what if I'm the son who says that he will obey, and doesn't? What if I'm that son?

What if I convince myself that I'll be obedient, and then I'm not? Because this son doesn't understand that God isn't looking for people who are respectably and moderately religious, who say all the right things, but never experience the profound transformation of knowing Jesus, and really encountering the Holy Spirit.

The second son doesn't get that respectable religiosity and pious platitudes just don't cut it. The second son doesn't listen when Jesus says, if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own wife, he cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. That son doesn't listen to that. That son is deceived.

[8:32] That son is in an even more dangerous place than the crooked tax collector who hasn't come to repentance because at least the crooked tax collector should know that he is in need of repentance and forgiveness.

The son reminds us, hey, I can call myself a follower of God. I can call myself a Christian.

I can claim to be following God's will. I can claim that I'm going to do it. And all of these claims can end up being nothing more than a devastating deception. Because Jesus tells us, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Second son reminds us really that there are only two final possibilities. We will either die to self and be born anew in Christ or we will die and perish in our sins. Make no mistake, if we seek to follow Jesus without being willing to die, to renounce all that we have, to renounce our father and our mother for his sake, to give our very lives if necessary, we seek to follow Jesus without that attitude.

[10:02] We're only fooling ourselves if we think we're anything other than the second son. It's better to be the first son.

The son who recognizes his disobedience, who repents and believes. That kind of son then submits to the authority and lordship of Jesus in his life. Now, when I was working on this sermon, I was

thinking about the recent news a couple weeks ago of the death of Nabeel Qureshi. Anyone else familiar with him? He came to mind. The kind of life that he led came to mind. Now, for anyone who doesn't know, he was a protege of Ravi Zacharias.

He was a Christian writer. He was a speaker, an apologist. And he just passed away at the age of 34 from stomach cancer. But, his short life was fruitful for the gospel.

Now, he was a convert to the faith from Islam. And he was a devout Muslim, devoted his early life to his false religion, which he had essentially inherited from generations of his ancestors.

[11:14] And he had this to say about the influence of Islam in his early life, just to give you a perspective on where he was coming from. He said, Islam gave me discipline, purpose, morals, family values, and clear direction for worship.

Islam was the lifeblood that coursed through my veins. Islam was my identity and I loved it. I boldly issued the call of Islam to anyone and everyone who would listen, proclaiming that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger.

But, then he encountered Christian friends who started witnessing to him. He started examining the claims of the Quran and the claims of the Bible.

He started examining the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. And God kept calling to him. He got to the point where the Bible kept drawing him in and drawing him in.

He described it like this, I could not put the Bible down. I began reading fervently, reaching Matthew 10:37, which taught me that I must love God more than my mother and father.

[12:22] But Jesus, I said, accepting you would be like dying. I will have to give up everything. The next verse spoke to me saying, he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

He who has found his life will lose it and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it. Jesus was being very blunt. For Muslims, following the gospel is more than a call to prayer.

It is a call to die. I knelt at the foot of my bed and gave up my life. A few days later, the two people I love most in the world, he's talking about his parents here.

We're shattered by my betrayal. To this day, my family is broken by the decision I made and it is excruciating every time I see the cost I had to pay.

Nabil ended the article this account came from with these words though. To follow him is worth giving up everything. In another place, he said this, was it worth it?

[13:25] Absolutely, it was worth it. I would do it a hundred times over again. My mom and dad didn't come to my wedding. Every single time I see a video of a son dancing with his mother at his wedding, I have to think that it was worth it.

Every time I see parents lovingly hug their children and say, we're proud of you, I have to think it was worth it because it was worth it. You know, Nabil was like the first son.

He was called from idolatry, called from false religion, called from propagating falsehood. What did he do? He repented, he believed, he followed Jesus no matter the cost.

And that's something the second son simply can't understand. But what about us, brothers and sisters? What do we see when we look in our own hearts?

Are we like the second son? Are we like those who appear religious, who just think, think that they're doing just fine when their hearts are far from God?

[14:38] Are we like those who love father and mother more than they love Jesus? Who love their children more than Jesus? Who love their reputations more than Jesus? Who love their jobs and their possessions more than Jesus?

Who love the things of this world more than Jesus? Who love their sins more than Jesus? Who want the benefits of Jesus but don't want to die with Him that they might be raised with Him?

Is that us? My brothers, my sisters, I confess to God and before each of you, that I have too often been like the son who said that he was going to obey and then didn't.

Have you? If so, let's repent together this morning. Let's turn to Jesus in faith and in repentance, trusting that His blood will cleanse us from sin's guilt and power, trusting that if we call on Him, He will give us the grace to love Him over all other things.

The grace to fully submit to Him as Lord of our lives to obey Him and to bear good fruit. Let's seek the Lord this morning that He would start with us, with our hearts, that He would transform us and our congregation, our community, and our nation so we cry out to Him.

[16:05] Father, send Your Holy Spirit, send fire from above to light our hearts on fire with love for You, for righteousness. Make us obedient, make us holy, make us fruitful.

We pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.