

James 2:14-26

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Preacher: Ian Maddock

[0:00] Let's pray together, shall we? Father, you've said to us in your word that it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

That you haven't come to call the righteous, or at least those who presume they are, but instead sinners to repentance. Father, give us repentant hearts this morning.

Give us hearts that see our need of you, of your forgiveness. And help us to see that in Jesus you have met our greatest need. It's in his name that we pray, and for his sake.

Amen. Friends, please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 21. Matthew 21, beginning at verse 28. Matthew 21, beginning at verse 28.

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, son, go and work today in the vineyard. I will not, he answered.

[1:20] But later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, I will, sir. But he didn't go.

Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first, they answered. Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

For John came to show you the way of righteousness. And you didn't believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Friends, I wonder, are you someone who's in for New Year's resolutions? Now it seems like a strange time to be asking, the end of July. But midway through the year, isn't that precisely the time to be asking?

You know, check in and see how we're all doing. Have you ever vowed to turn over a new leaf? Clean up some area of your life you're not happy with? Maybe even ashamed of?

[2:24] Or positively, have you ever resolved to start doing something you know you really ought to, but haven't got around to doing? Have slipped out of the practice of doing? You know, if you're anything like me, if you've made resolutions in the past, maybe just this last week, maybe this morning.

If you've vowed to do, vowed not to do, if you've resolved to change, if you're human, in other words, you'll know that it's one thing to make a resolution.

It's one thing to vow to do something. It's quite another thing to follow through. Which brings us to our passage this morning, another of Jesus' parables, this one unique to Matthew's gospel, the so-called parable of the two sons.

Jesus prefaces the parable with a question, verse 28. What do you think? And it's a question that he poses directly to the Pharisees, picking up the story in verse 28 as we're doing that.

It isn't immediately obvious, but it becomes clear enough in the second half of the passage. Verse 28, he asked the Pharisees, what do you think? There are two sons, both of whom are asked by their father to go and work in his vineyard.

[3 : 36] And their responses, they couldn't be more diametrically opposed. First, the first son, in an act of gross insubordination, especially in the first century world, astonishingly, inexplicably, the first son says no.

He resolves not to. But then eventually, we're not told how or why eventually, he changes his mind and he does. The other son is the polar opposite.

He pledges obedience, pledges loyalty. Of course he does, you know, no surprises there. That was the expected thing. He vows to do so. But in the end, he doesn't. In verse 31, the question's posed.

Okay, so which one's right? Which one did what the father wanted? And the answer is the one who did. Not the one who said, but the one who did. Verse 31.

The first son, they say. Not to condone the way the first son initially refused his father's command, but when push comes to shove, it was the first son. The one who eventually, who actually followed through.

[4 : 52] Who's right? So this parable, what's it all about? Well, it's all about how God wants us to be people who follow him, who follow through on following him.

How it's not enough to politely express good intentions. You know, say the sinner's prayer. Make a one-off decision for Christ. But then go off and live totally to the contrary.

Hypocrisy is not okay, in other words. As the old adage goes, actions speak louder than words. Now, friends, I don't know where you stand before God this morning.

Maybe you're more like the first son. Maybe when it comes to following Jesus as your Lord, as your Savior, maybe at one point in your life you were someone who flat out said no.

But now you've changed your mind. You've said, I will. And by his grace, in his strength, you're striving to follow through. But maybe not. Maybe you're more like the second son.

[5 : 55] Maybe you can resonate with him a little more. Maybe at some point in your life you made a commitment to turn away from your sin. To trust in Jesus' merits alone for your salvation. To follow him.

You made that commitment. Maybe at some point in your life you said, I will. But you're not. That was a long time ago.

That was then. This is now. Maybe you're more like the second son. Well, you know what? Maybe you're neither. You don't fit into either category.

Maybe you're a skeptic. You always have been. But here's the thing. Whoever we are, wherever we stand before God, my guess is that when it comes to the point of Jesus' parable, on a superficial level at least, that hypocrisy is not okay.

That whatever our lives are like, there's one thing that we all share in common, and that's that when it comes to how we live, there's a gap between the is and what ought to be. And that's not okay.

[6 : 57] My guess is that when it comes to these things, you'd be hard-pressed finding anyone who'd disagree. You know, being someone who walks the walk and doesn't just talk the talk, aspiring to that, my guess is surely this is an ideal that we can all subscribe to, regardless of what standard we use, regardless of where we stand before God, which begs the question, the much more interesting question, I think.

Well, let's suppose that we want to change. Supposing we all agree that actions speak louder than words. Supposing we all want there to be an increasing conformity between our words and our actions.

Supposing we want to be people who do what we say, who live up to what we say, who practice what we preach, who have that gap between the is and the ought of our lives bridged.

A much more interesting question is, the real question is, how? That's the real question, isn't it? And where I want to end up this morning is this, what I hope for us to see is this, that these two sons, these diametrically opposed sons, that they represent, they embody two diametrically opposed ways of answering that question.

Two diametrically opposed ways of approaching God. Our way? This is God's way. The second son. The one who says he'll serve his father, but who doesn't.

[8:27] That's our way. And it's characterized by a naively optimistic anthropology, theologically speaking, if I can put it that way. In other words, when it comes to our capacity, our desire to please God, to live for him, like the second son, by nature, all of us think too highly of ourselves.

When it comes to living a righteous life, we say, I will. But in our own strength, or lack thereof, we fall flat on our faces, don't we?

We vow, but we fail to follow through. That gap between the is and the ought of our lives, we think we can bridge it ourselves through our own efforts, but in the end, we fail.

We all fail to follow through. The second son, that's our way. Whereas the first son, the son who says no, who refuses his father, but who's eventually changed, the first son, he's a picture of what God longs to do in us and for us.

He's a picture of how God bridges that gap between the is of our lives and the ought of our lives himself. And it begins with us realizing that by nature, like the first son, all of us have refused God, said no to him, refused to serve him, refused to use the gifts that he's given us in his vineyard.

[9:56] And yet that's not where God leaves us. Out of his mercy and kindness, he doesn't give us what we ask for. He changes us, gives us a new heart, by grace causes us to change our minds, bridges that gap himself on our behalf.

These two sons, diametrically opposed sons, they represent two diametrically opposed ways to God. Try to reform ourselves and fail versus God changing us from within.

I'll say more on this in a moment, but for the time being, as we've already begun to see, notice that when Jesus speaks this parable, he's got a very specific target audience in mind. These two sons. In his mind, in his day, they represented two discreet, concrete segments of first century Jewish society.

Verse 28. He's asked the Pharisees, what do you think? And then again, in verse 31, he asked, which of the two, which of these two sons did what the father wanted?

The first they answered. And then going on, just in case they didn't get it, Jesus tells them who these two sons represent. The two categories of people that they represent.

[11:06] Jesus said to them, he said to the Pharisees, I tell you the truth. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to show you the way of righteousness, and you didn't believe him.

But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you didn't repent and believe him. In other words, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, they're like the first son.

ones who've refused God, said no to God, but now they're changing their minds. And from what Jesus is saying in verse 32, a good many of them, it seems, enough for the Pharisees to have taken notice.

Which begs the question, who are these people? These tax collectors? And how have they refused God? Working as a prostitute, I can see how that's refusing to work in God's vineyard, so to speak.

But what about tax collectors? How is working for the first century Palestinian IRS such a disreputable thing? Despicable thing, even. And the answer is because they weren't working for the IRS equivalent.

- [12:15] They were working for the Romans. Working against their own people, if you will. As we saw last week, if the Pharisees were the most moral, the most ethical, the most religious, the most upstanding and exemplary people in Jewish society, tax collectors were the very opposite end of the spectrum.

If Pharisees were paragons of virtue, the tax collectors were paragons of vice. If Pharisees were good, tax collectors were bad. They were the lowlifes, the traitors, scum of the earth.

In a word, they were sinners. How so, we ask? Well, as I've alluded to, again, as we saw last week, the reason they were so despised is because they were collaborating with the enemy, collaborating with the Romans, Jews who were collaborating at their own people's expense.

Specifically, they were volunteers who offered to collect taxes for the empire that was oppressing their own people. That's the way the Romans did things when it came to collecting revenue for the territories they conquered and now oversaw.

Rather than going collecting the taxes themselves, they subcontracted out the dirty work to the indigenous population, to locals who were willing to sell out. And so a would-be tax collector, he would have made a bid in advance to collect taxes for the Romans.

- [13:37] And if he won the bid, what he was committing himself to do, at the very least, was to collect that minimum amount that he owed to the Romans. But here's the thing. If that wasn't bad enough, there wasn't anything stopping him from collecting more on top of that.

Nothing stopping him from extorting as much as he could on top of that. That's where his profits came from. Profiting at his own countryman's expense. So it's easy to see why a tax collector would have been utterly despised in the mind of the people.

They were beyond forgiveness. Don't think IRS worker. They were more like citizens of countries who'd been occupied by the Germans during World War II, who were now collaborating with the Nazis, helping a foreign power subjugate their own people for personal profit.

That's what tax collectors did. Unbelievably, that's what Matthew, the author of this gospel, Matthew, formerly known as Levi, that's what he used to do.

That's who he used to be. Can you imagine? As Matthew records this parable, just how intensely personal, how poignant this must have been for him.

- [14:51] These two categories, tax collectors versus Pharisees, son one versus son two, they weren't just sort of abstract, generic categories for him. The first son, a tax collector, somebody who'd said no to God, not just verbally, but with their life, somebody who by God's grace had changed, had been changed.

Friends, that was him. Literally. And verse 32, from what Jesus is saying. From what we know, reading elsewhere in the gospels, he wasn't alone either.

Matthew wasn't alone either. There were lots of former tax collectors whose minds, whose hearts had been changed, who were now following Jesus. People like Zacchaeus in Luke's gospel. The countless tax collectors that Jesus was famous, infamous in the eyes of the Pharisees, for fellowshiping with, sharing meals with.

Which itself begs the question, who were these Pharisees? And why were they so incensed that Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors?

I mean, shouldn't they have been rejoicing? I mean, surely this is great news, isn't it? You know, that people who'd been living such openly defiant lives, openly sinful lives, that they'd changed their minds.

- [16:07] That they'd been changed. Shouldn't the Pharisees have been rejoicing? Well, you know, they should have. But they weren't. And the reason they weren't is because as far as the Pharisees were concerned, working in God's vineyard, it's a right we earn.

And it's a right we forfeit if we're sinful. That's why they were so concerned to be right. That's why they were so fearful of being wrong. That's why they took all sorts of additional measures, went above and beyond what was required in God's word.

So concerned were they not to break any of God's commandments, not out of a love for God, not out of gratitude, but out of fear. Friends, I wonder if you can relate to this.

Their whole self-worth was so bound up, so dependent upon their moral performance that they couldn't bear to admit when they fell short of their own standards, let alone God's.

They couldn't bear to admit moral failure. And more than that, they couldn't bear to think of a God who admitted moral failures.

- [17:29] It's not the healthy you need a doctor, says Jesus in Luke's gospel. It's not the healthy you need a doctor, but the sick. I haven't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The Pharisees, they couldn't bear to think of themselves as sinners.

More than that, they couldn't bear to think of God as being a God who welcomed sinners, who welcomes us with open arms when we acknowledge as much, when we repent, when we repent of refusing God, when we repent of our hypocrisy.

As far as the Pharisees were concerned, God's grace, the unmerited, undeserved favor that he longs to show to us, it wasn't good news.

It was a cop-out. Friends, I wonder, can you relate to this? In Martin Luther's words, it's very hard for a person to believe that God is gracious to them.

The human heart can't grasp this, he wrote. Friends, have you grasped it? The Pharisees, they wanted to change.

- [18:43] They wanted to be right in God's eyes. The trouble was they wanted to do it themselves. They thought they could do it themselves. Couldn't bear to admit that they couldn't. Can you?

Friends, can you? Now, the Pharisees didn't set out to be hypocrites. Who does? Who sets out to be a hypocrite? They didn't want the reputation.

They didn't want to be exposed for hypocrisy in the way that they were. They desperately wanted to be people who practice what they preach. Who doesn't? They were zealous for God, had a seemingly boundless amount of energy to burn trying to please God.

They just couldn't bear to admit that they were like the second son. That they were people who'd said, I will to God, but who'd failed. That God was a gracious and compassionate God, a God who welcomes sons like the first, ahead of them, verse 31, instead of themselves.

And you know, this brings us back to the theme that I raised at the beginning, that this parable, these two diametrically opposed sons, they represent two diametrically opposed ways of relating to God.

- [19:56] Our way versus God's way. The way of grace versus the way of law. This parable, it's not Jesus playing life coach. It's not a pep talk Jesus style.

Okay, people, actions speak louder than words. Let's walk the walk, not just talk the talk. You know, let's all try harder now. It's not what it is. You know, it's one thing to resolve to live an exemplary life, a God-honoring life.

It's quite another thing to follow through. On that we can all agree. Following through is tough. Practicing what you profess is hard, no matter how low you set the bar, let alone when we measure ourselves against God's perfect standard of righteousness.

What I'm saying is, you'd be hard-pressed finding anyone wanting to dispute that this is a worthy ideal, a worthy aspiration. the question is, how?

Given that no matter how ethical, how upright and moral we might be, there's always a gap between our moral expectations and our moral performance, between the is and the ought of our lives, the real question is, how do we become someone who's pleasing in God's sight?

[21 : 10] What hope do we have? And, Francis, I've alluded to already, it's at this point that our approach, the second son, versus God's approach, the first son, they couldn't be more different.

Can I summarize it this way? It's the difference between moral reformation, that's our way, that's the second son's way, the Pharisee's way, trying harder, turning over a new leaf, vowing to bridge that gap between how we are and how we want to be, how God wants us to be.

It's the difference between our way, between moral reformation versus spiritual transformation. That's God's way. It's the difference between how, it's the difference between what we try to do in our own strength, trying to suppress our desires, trying to be people who say, I will, in our own strength, versus what God promises to do for us, do for us what we can't do for ourselves and transform us from within.

not just give us an external clean-up, but give us a new heart, not just to, not just help us to suppress our old desires, but replace them with new desires.

Our approach versus God's approach, they couldn't be more diametrically opposed. Superficial moral reformation versus deep, inward, spiritual transformation.

[22 : 39] Friends, allow me to illustrate, illustrate our way of trying to bridge this gap between what we profess and what we practice versus God's way. The way of the second son versus the way of the first.

If you're in the evening service a couple of weeks ago, I shared this illustration. Apologies to the handful who were there for that. I have two young children, Lachlan and Phoebe. Some of you, many of you will know them.

Lachlan's two and a half and very fond of sports, but he's also very fond of books, especially Mr. Men books. Now, maybe you've seen the Mr. Men series yourself.

I grew up with them. There are 46 Mr. Men in this series. We have 34 at last count, and Lachlan knows every single one of them back to front. If you babysit for us, I can guarantee you, he'll try and introduce you to all 34 of these guys.

Mr. Men books, they're kids' books, right? You know, we're grown-ups. What are we talking about kids' books for? Well, these are kids' books, but they're also full of second son theology.

[23 : 47] Allow me to illustrate that the basic premise of most Mr. Men books is that we all need to change. True enough. Can't argue with that. But when it comes to our lives, there's a gap between what is and what ought to be.

We need to change. That's the basic premise of most of these stories. The question is how. How do we change? Is it possible? If so, how? And the answer in many of the Mr. Men books is yes, we can.

How? By moral reformation. By trying to reform ourselves. By turning over a new leaf. By trying harder. Or by others trying their best to reform us.

By others shaming us. Bullying us into changing our behaviour. The basic premise of many of these stories, the basic premise of the world that we live in is that if we want to be accepted, more liked, then we better change and become more likeable.

That's the implicit theology embedded in these stories that we all need to change and that change happens by giving people incentives to reform their behaviour but by giving people disincentives not to change.

[24:57] Change is a matter of self-wrought moral reformation. Mr. Men books, they're children's books but they're not theologically neutral. No literature is. Whatever its genre, whoever its target audience is and so each book features a particular Mr. Man.

There are often cameo appearances by other characters but for the most part they focus on one individual and many of them, many but not all of them, are characterised by a serious moral flaw that needs change and changing fast.

So you've got characters like Mr. Greedy and Mr. Uppity and Mr. Chatterbox, for instance. Characters like Mr. Nosey.

Mr. Nosey's a nuisance, there's no doubt about it, always poking his nose into other people's business. He's a busybody and so the good folk, the good townsfolk decide that a little intervention's in order and let me tell you, these guys don't mess around.

They get together and plot and plan all these horrendous things that they're going to do to Mr. Nosey to get him to change. And so Mr. Nosey goes prying about as usual and he pokes his nose around a wall and the town painter splashes his nose with paint.

[26:12] But he's undeterred and he keeps prying about. He pokes his nose over a fence and the town laundry lady plants a clothes peg right on his nose but still he doesn't get the message. He still keeps poking about, pokes his nose around another wall and gets whacked by a hammer.

And then last of all, he's out in the woods and he's just about to poke his nose around a tree when he thinks the better of it and just as well because the town carpenter's there with his saw. Goodness knows would have happened, you know, the only Mr. Man book with an R rating.

Anyway, the point is that eventually by the end of the story Mr. Nosey gets the message. He comes to the conclusion that life would be a lot more pleasant if he changed, if he poked his nose into other people's business less, if he kept to his own business more.

It's only a kid's book. But friends, don't be deceived. It's as concise a model as you'll find anywhere of what happens when we're left to our own devices and how we try to affect change.

When it comes to change, when it comes to changing ourselves, changing others, left to our own devices, our approach is to try and reform ourselves. Like the characters in a Mr. Man story, our approach focuses on superficial behaviour adjustment.

[27:30] At which point, you might well say to me, but hang on, you know, the Mr. Man characters, they do change, don't they? Yeah, Mr. Chatterbox ends up talking less, listening more.

Mr. Greedy starts off fat, ends up thin. Mr. Nosey ends up less of a busybody. The characters in these Mr. Men stories, that they pursue change via moral reformation and it seems to work.

And they do change. You know, can't we all point to cases of people who vowed to reform themselves and succeeded? And you know, maybe we can.

Maybe in the short run, at least. Maybe if we limit what we're trying to change narrowly enough, maybe we can achieve some sort of superficial moral reform.

If we're single-minded enough, maybe we can, to some small degree at least, maybe we can go somewhere to bridging the gap between the years and the ought of our lives. But friends, you know what? And I think we all recognise this deep down.

[28:35] And this is where our efforts always fall short. that no matter how hard we try to reform ourselves, no matter how hard others try to reform us, when we focus on behaviour alteration, at the end of the day, it's just tinkering with externals.

You know, Mr. Nosy changes his behaviour, but he's still Mr. Nosy. His name doesn't change. His identity doesn't change. What I'm saying is left to our own devices, our approach to change, like the second son, saying, I will.

Working with a naively optimistic anthropology, spiritually speaking, playing the behaviour modification game, it doesn't get to the heart of the matter. It doesn't get to the heart of the matter because it doesn't get to the matter of our hearts.

By nature, our hearts are deceitful and corrupt. Who can understand them, says the prophet Jeremiah. The first son versus the second son.

God's approach versus our approach. They couldn't be more different. God's no less convinced that we need to change, friends, but his approach couldn't be more different. He knows that we need to change.

[29:54] And the good news of the gospel, it is, is that he longs to change us. Change us. Transform us from within. He knows that true change, it's not about changing behaviour, it begins with changing our hearts.

It's an internal thing, not an external thing. It's not about suppressing antisocial desires, it's about displacing them. And not just displacing them either, it's about replacing them with godly desires.

God knows we need to change. When he looks at your life, when he looks at my life, he knows that there's a gap between what is and what ought to be, what he requires us.

In our own strength, he knows it's an unbridgeable gap, which makes the good news of the gospel especially sweet. Not try-hard, but that in Christ, he has bridged that gap himself.

How can he do this? Only if in Jesus, only if he becomes like us and lives a perfect life on our behalf. And only if he dies on our behalf.

[31:05] And only if he's raised on our behalf. And friends, Jesus has done all of these things on our behalf. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel. That if we acknowledge that we're like the first son, Jesus has bridged the gap on our behalf.

He took upon himself what he didn't deserve so that we can receive what we don't deserve. Full forgiveness. The righteousness of God credited to our account.

Friends, we are soon to head out this morning. Let me ask, which son are you? Let's pray together, shall we? Father, you've said to us in your word that it's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

That you haven't come to call the righteous the second sons of the world. Those who think that they can come to you in their own strength, in their own righteousness. Father, you haven't come to call the self-professed righteous but instead sinners.

The first sons. Those who've willfully refused you but those whom you change. Father, if you haven't already, give us repentant hearts this morning.

[32:30] Lord, give us eyes to see how we've rebelled against you but Lord, don't leave us there. Give us eyes to see Jesus and the provision you've made for our forgiveness.

Father, we thank you for him. We thank you for the way that while we were still sinners, for the way he bridged the gap between the is and the ought of our lives on our behalf.

He lived a perfect life on our behalf, in our stead. He died on our behalf. He was raised on our behalf. Holy Spirit, grow us in our dependence on your grace and our devotion towards Christ this day.

This we ask in his name and for his sake. Amen. Amen.