

Pentecost 17 / September 27, 2020

Matthew 21:31

“For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.”

Have you ever told someone you would do something, but failed to keep your promise? Have you ever refused to do something your mother or father, or other person in authority, asked you to do? I'm sure we can all say 'yes' to both questions. We've all made promises that we haven't kept. We've probably all agreed to do something, just to avoid conflict, even though we knew we wouldn't likely follow through. We can see ourselves in both of the children in Jesus' parable. As much as we would like to relate to the child who changed his mind and repented of his refusal to do what his father asked, there are probably occasions when we didn't have a change of heart and do what we were asked to do. And even if we did have a change of heart, we probably did what we were asked, grudgingly. If there is one constant in human nature, it's that we don't like being told what to do, do we?

Jesus' parable and conversation with the religious leaders in the temple, is set within the context of the preaching of John the Baptist. John told people what to do! He told them to repent! If there is one thing we don't like, it's being told we are doing something wrong and that we should stop doing it. In fact, being told to stop doing something can impel us to do it more, just to annoy the person who told us to stop. Have you ever done anything like that? Me too, but that's beside the point. The point is that the religious leaders claimed to be obedient to God, but Jesus said they weren't putting their words into practice. That's what John the Baptist also said, but they refused to believe him. John told people that their hearts were far from God and that they were only pretending to honour Him with their lips. He called them to turn to God in faith and live in accordance with His promises, especially His promise to forgive.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes were outwardly disobedient to God. Their sins were obvious even to themselves! The sin of the religious leaders was more subtle. The religious leaders were outwardly obedient, but they were only honouring God with their lips, their hearts were far from Him. One of the ways this was manifested was in their lack of forgiveness for others, especially for people they considered the worst sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. Odd as it sounds the tax collectors and prostitutes were in a better position than the religious people; they knew they were sinners and didn't deny it. When John called them to repent and receive baptism for forgiveness and renewal of life, many of them did. They knew they were sinners, they just needed to be called to receive forgiveness. Because they believed John when he said they were sinners, they believed Jesus when He said they were forgiven. They were obedient to God's word of forgiveness. The obedience of faith is to receive Jesus as Saviour and to believe that with Him there is forgiveness.

In the gospel of John, Jesus had a similar conversation with some of the crowd which He had fed with five loaves of bread and two fish. They weren't the chief priests and temple teachers as in our gospel, but they were very religious people. They asked Jesus, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." Jesus was referring to Himself as the one who was sent. He was saying that the work of God was that they would receive Him as the Christ and believe in Him as their Saviour. The problem was they didn't want to believe and so this was the last thing they wanted to hear. This gospel takes place in the temple courts the Monday of Holy Week. The previous day, Palm Sunday, Jesus had taken charge of the temple, by chasing out the merchants and money changers. In our gospel the religious leaders challenge Jesus, as to where He got the authority to take charge of the temple. It was a question born of defiance. They knew His authority came from God. They just didn't want to believe it!

The irony is that the religious people were the ones who wouldn't believe, while the people who were the most irreligious believed in Him, repented and received forgiveness. Jesus was sent to call the lost sheep of the house of Israel to repentance. It's significant that much of Jesus' teaching is directed at calling religious people to repentance. You would think it would have been the other way around. It should have been the sinners, the irreligious, whom He called to repent. He called them too, for He was sent to seek and to save the lost. However, the irreligious people were more likely to repent; whereas the religious people didn't think they needed repentance or forgiveness. It is always a temptation for religiously observant people to forget our own need for repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus visited the home of a pharisee named Simon. As they visited, a woman with a reputation of being a notorious sinner, approached Jesus and repented with tears. Instead of being happy that a lost sheep had returned to the fold, the pharisee thought to himself that there must be something wrong with Jesus. He reasoned, "If this man really were a prophet, He would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." Jesus knew all about her. He knew she needed forgiveness. Jesus knew about Simon too. He knew his thoughts and his sins. The pharisee also needed forgiveness, he just didn't want to confess it. As religious people we must remember that we always need forgiveness. The obedience of faith is to believe in Jesus as Saviour, confess our sinfulness and to come to Him for forgiveness.

There are two children in Jesus' parable. The father asks both to work in the vineyard. The first tells the father to take a hike, pulls the covers over his head and goes back to sleep. Later he feels bad about what he said and goes to the vineyard. The other promises the father to work in the vineyard, but he doesn't. Jesus asked, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They answered, "The first." The first did the will of his father, but neither of them did what was right. The second child lied and didn't do what he said he would do. The first child did what his father wanted, but only after he treated him in a most disrespectful manner. A missionary told the parable to modern Palestinians, who were unfamiliar with it. They said that although the first child repented, that he committed the worst sin. In their culture it would be better to lie to your father, than to speak so harshly to his face. Although one repented and did the father's will, both children sinned against their father. We all sin against our heavenly Father. We all need to repent and seek His gift of forgiveness.

One repented of his disobedience, but both sinned. We all sin against our heavenly Father. Some sins are more grievous than others; but we all sin in thoughts, words and in deeds. We sin by what we have done and by what we have left undone. Sometimes we tell our heavenly Father to get lost and refuse to listen to His word, or do His will. Sometimes we promise to do what He asks, but then fail to keep our word. Sometimes we presume on His grace. After all, we can always say 'sorry.' Of course, we can and should say we are sorry. Whether we sin seven times or seven times seventy in a day, God is rich in forgiveness, merciful in dealing with His children and kind in love. Yet there is a difference between presuming upon grace when contemplating sin, sinning in weakness and coming to God for the grace of forgiveness. We all need God's forgiveness and His Spirit to empower us to do His will. The obedience of faith is to recognize sin, seek strength in temptation, confess our sins to God and come to Jesus as our Saviour.

We make distinctions between sins and people. We consider some sins worse than others. We consider some people worse sinners than others. It's easier to see sin in others, than it is to see it in ourselves. It's easier to make an excuse for sin, than it is to repent and come to Jesus for forgiveness. But Jesus calls all people to Himself in repentance to receive the grace of forgiveness. Some sins are worse than others, but all sin is an offense against God. Some people sin more grievously than others, but all sin is a sign of human separation from God. Sin shows that we all need a Saviour.

Neither child in Jesus' parable was without sin. Neither treated their father with respect, as no one and none of us always treats the heavenly Father with respect. But the heavenly Father loves us and every human soul. He gave Jesus to be the Saviour of all people. Because He is our Saviour we respond to Him with the obedience of faith; confessing our sins and seeking His forgiveness. God wants us to believe in the One He has sent; Jesus, His Son. He is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

God grant us to live with Him in the obedience of faith, trusting in His mercy, seeking to do His will; but most importantly, believing in Jesus and treasuring Him in our hearts as Saviour and Lord. In His Name. Amen