

Matthew 21:23-32
Sept 28, 2008

South Plains
Evangelism Sunday

Do the Right Thing

This is a parable for teenagers. If we said the little parable of the two sons is about the phonies of the world, we would not be far off the mark. Some parables required Jesus to interpret them. Not so here. He tells the story of two sons; asks which son does the will of his father; and gets the right answer from his hearers immediately. Then, he gives a kind of booby prize to the people who gave the right answer:

Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God before you. (21:31)

Jesus is about as subtle as a man with a sawed off shotgun. He draws a bead on the discontented chief priests and elders of the Jewish people, and blasts away with a warning that ricochets down through the centuries toward anyone who sounds religious, but does evil.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem after months of teaching in Judea and the surrounding regions. People know what he stands for. He has passed the point of shadow-boxing with the religious authorities. The conflict in out in the open and Jesus welcomes this opportunity during the feast of Passover to make clear his differences with the religion of the day. Yesterday, according to

Matthew, he drove the money-changers out of the temple. Today he returns to that sacred space for a verbal confrontation with the people who are the very embodiment of piety. The chief priests and the elders find him teaching in the temple courtyard where they ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority (21:23)?"

He answers with a question of his own. Where did John the Baptist get his authority? They refuse to commit themselves, so he refuses to answer them directly. Instead he tells three parables. The parable of the two sons is the most gentle. One son insults his father by telling him directly that he refuses to do the work in the vineyard. Later, he changes his mind and goes anyway. The second son acts the part of the dutiful boy, answering, "I go, Sir." But, despite his words, he never obeys his father.

The religious leaders are all like the second son: they give lip service to the law of God but they do not practice it. They are the hypocrites who have been the target of Jesus' anger before. Sabbath laws for them were an excuse to avoiding helping the neighbor with his ox in the ditch. Religious duties prevented them from going to the aid of a robbery victim as the good Samaritan did. Worst of all, they used religious vows to rationalize ignoring the needs of their aged parents.

We've all known people like that. Piety for them is the show of going to church and saying the right things in

front of others. But, as soon as they think no one is watching, they lie or curse or beat their wives or slander their sisters. If you want to know who the phonies are in any town or church, ask the teenagers. Teenagers may not know the full story, but they seem to have radar that picks up hypocrisy a mile away.

Jesus' warning applies equally to our own religious leaders, especially to preachers. The people whom we look down on may well go into the kingdom of God ahead of us, if we fail to practice what we preach.

This parable is about more than phonies, however. It is also about genuine goodness, real people with an authentic faith. And, it tells us something about real evangelism on Evangelism Sunday. Jesus was the first evangelist. His message is called the evangel, the gospel, the good news of the coming kingdom.

But think of the contrast between the Jesus described in the Bible and the evangelists we know. When we hear somebody called an evangelist, what comes to mind? A speaker manipulating the emotions of a crowd? A pushy preacher who wants something? A handful of flyers shoved in your hand?

The method of Jesus the evangelist is quite different, and I believe more effective for the church. Jesus looks first at the core of human behavior. When prostitutes and tax collectors produced fruits of the kingdom, deeds of kindness and morality, he

commended them. He used the black sheep of the Jewish people, a Samaritan, as the ideal example of neighbor love. He paid less attention to what people said and more to what they did.

People outside the people of God, unchurched people who need to hear the good news of the gospel, respond to concrete deeds that serve immediate human needs today just as they responded to Jesus. That's not the reason we help people, but that's a dimension of evangelism we sometimes overlook. Your session voted to send \$350 to help people on the Texas coast devastated by hurricane Gustav. That was simply the right thing to do. It's also the most direct way of showing unchurched people what Jesus Christ means to us.

We need to be careful in reading this parable. Telling the gospel goes hand in hand with showing what it means. Jesus went to the synagogues to worship and teach as well as to heal. We will only confuse the story if we cannot or will not include teaching and professing our faith alongside our demonstration.

Where are today's equivalents of the tax collectors and harlots? Are they the robber barons of Wall Street? Drug pushers on the corner? Violent ghetto gangs? This parable is also about them. When they listen to the good news about Jesus, repent of their sins and, by the grace of God, have their lives turned around, they go into the kingdom before the hypocritical preachers and grumbling church leaders.

When I try to puzzle out what this passage might mean to ordinary folks, garden variety church people and people without a church, I find at least three warnings that Jesus has for all of us.

The first warning is to keep life in perspective. The world is full of people whose religious beliefs and practices disagree with our own. Aside from the obvious tax collectors and sinners, drug pushers and harlots, there are varieties of religious experience. I think of my own father in this regard. By modern standards, his language would be considered racist; and it did reflect some deep-seated prejudice. But, I never saw my father behave as anything but a gentleman with African Americans he did not know. With those he did know, he was kind and loving. There is a bedrock of behavior that counts more than having the right opinions. We need to see opinions in the light of behavior that does the right thing.

The second warning has to do with this matter of hypocrisy. It is easy to point a finger at self-righteous religious people who don't practice what they preach. But, pointing a finger at others can make us cynical about religious faith. Cynicism can be overcome. Be careful about being side-tracked by cynicism in the church or anywhere else. Just do the right thing yourself.

Finally, we hear a lot about the importance of a positive attitude. Whether we're looking for a date, applying for job, raising children or just asserting our right

Don't you wish those other churches, who have so many hypocrites in them, would take this passage to heart?

Of course, this passage is not only about hypocrites and terrible sinners who repent. It's also about people like you and me. Each one of us has a degree of phoniness, a streak of hypocrisy. I know I do. I work hard at looking good. Each person carries the germ of self-centeredness that flares into the sickness of sin from time to time. We may not make our living by flagrant sinning, but we cut corners, we shade the truth, and we will even prostitute ourselves by selling out our deepest commitments for the sake of what we conceive to be self-preservation.

Ludwig von Beethoven was loved for his music, but not for his gentle temperament. He could launch into a tirade of complaints about Vienna where he said, "Things are mean and nasty. It could not be worse from top to bottom. Everyone is a scoundrel." That was the public Beethoven everyone knew well. After his death, someone found in his diary an entry recorded from about the same time as the Vienna outburst. The note reads, "Only one thing I ask of Thee, O God: Cease not to work at my improvement." That's a prayer worthy of any Christian. We are each wonderfully made from a bundle of contradictions. We look one way to the world and another way to God.

to a little happiness, we need a positive attitude. Please note that it was the disobedient son who had a positive attitude. He responded with alacrity and respect. But, the right attitude does not mean anything in Jesus' eyes unless they lead to right actions. Don't fool yourself with a positive attitude. Just do the right thing.

This is a parable about real people like you and me. People who are humble enough to appreciate the difference between one person's circumstances and another's. People who are honest enough to admit when they are wrong. Most importantly, it's about people willing to accept the opportunity to repent and find fellowship in the community of forgiven sinners. People seeking the abundant life of the kingdom. This is about our opportunity to change our ways and do the right thing in obedience to Jesus Christ.