

WPC
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The Yes and No Brothers
Matthew 21:28-32

This brief parable of the two brothers calls to mind something Jesus said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in his Sermon on the Mount: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). There's often a gap between hearing and doing. I want to talk about that today, the gap. There's often a lag time between hearing Jesus' words and doing them.

Jesus tells this parable of the two brothers on the Monday of Holy Week, the last week of his life on earth - after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, after he chased the moneychangers from the temple, after cursing the fig tree and causing it to wither for failing to bear fruit. The religious leaders are stirred up against him, so when Jesus goes back to the temple to teach, they question him. The main thing they want to know is by whose authority he was doing these things. Their interrogation reminds me of the lyrics to "Jesus Christ Superstar:" "Jesus Christ,

Superstar, do you think you're who they say you are?" They want to know, who does this guy think he is?

Instead of answering them, Jesus asks them a question: "What do you think?" Then he tells them the story of the "Yes and No Brothers" (Barbara Brown Taylor). It's a parable about two children, each of whom is flawed, but in different ways. When the father asks each of them in turn to go work in the vineyard, the No brother says he will not go, but later changes his mind and goes. At first, he acted as if his father's will was against him, and he opposes it. But later on he changes his mind, and in fact goes and does what he's asked to do.

I like the way Earl Palmer describes the No brother: "he's a big problem at breakfast, but he's a joy at supper, because he does finally end up in the vineyard."

The Yes brother is just as complicated as his brother. He says he will go but never does. This son says what he thinks his father wants to hear, but for whatever reasons (and notice, Jesus is not interested in his reasons) he does not in fact show up at the vineyard. Let's give him some credit, though: at breakfast, he's a joy to be around.

Notice how he answers his father: “I go, sir (*kurios* -Lord).” He knows how to use words to butter people up – “Sure, I’ll go work in the vineyard, right after I take out the garbage and mow the lawn.” The only problem is, he never gets there. “So if this brother is a joy at breakfast...he’s a big problem at supper. And unfortunately for him, this is a supper parable, not a breakfast parable” (Palmer).

So, Jesus asks, which brother did the will of his father? “Well, that’s easy, the first brother,” respond the religious leaders. The guy who said no but did it anyway. Because it’s clear that it wasn’t what either boy *said* that really mattered but what he finally *did*. And that much of the story didn’t bother these religious leaders.

As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, this was not the part of the truth that got Jesus killed. “What got him killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests and elders which brother they were. They were the Yes men, he told them, who said all the right things, believed all the right things, stood for all the right things, but who would not *do* the right things God asked them to do,” (Taylor, Home By Another Way, 188).

So they were in for a big surprise. Jesus told them the tax collectors and prostitutes, people they despised, “were going into the kingdom ahead of them – not instead of them, but ahead of them - people who may have said

no at the beginning but who changed their minds and went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God” (Taylor, 188-9).

What’s this parable teaching? On one level it’s an obvious story about hypocrisy, which has always been one of the most serious charges against religious people – that we say one thing and do another, promising we’ll love each other on Sunday and then slandering and cheating each other on Monday.

And hypocrisy is indeed a serious issue, but I don’t think that’s the real problem Jesus is addressing with his parable. I think Jesus is much more concerned about “the unconscious way many of us substitute our beliefs about God for our obedience to God, as if it were enough to say ‘I go, sir,’ without ever tensing a muscle to get out of our chairs...It’s easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions” (Taylor, 189).

This parable helps us understand the journey that many people go through between hearing and doing. There’s often a period of time between when you hear the truth and when you actually do something about that truth. C.S. Lewis reflected on this in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. In reading *Screwtape*, we need to reverse everything because *Screwtape* is a

senior devil writing to a junior devil; therefore when he refers to the Enemy, he means God. When he refers to our father below, he means the devil.

In chapter 13, the patient who Screwtape is concerned about has repented. He was for a while heading toward the devil and had gone away from his faith, but then he suddenly reverses course and comes back to his faith in God. Screwtape is very upset with Wormwood for being a second-rate tempter and failing to hold on to this patient.

So then listen to what he says at the end of the 13th chapter: “It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster. The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it. Let him write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy (that would be God) plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act on it. No amount of piety in the imagination and affections will harm us, if we can keep it out of his will. As one of the humans has said (and here Lewis quotes G.K. Chesterton), active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he

feels without acting, the less he will ever be able to act, and in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.”¹

Another thing this parable teaches is that many people’s faith journey to finally accepting Jesus Christ is a struggle. Many do start out by saying no, and it’s only over time that the gospel starts making sense to them. Validation of my faith comes when I finally do the will of God, not when I just say the will of God.

Faith is an event. When you actually place your life in God’s hands, your faith will be validated. But you have to *do* it. It’s like tithing – if you’ve never done it, thinking about giving 10% of your income to God can give you an ulcer. But I’m reminded of a former WPC member, Ione Knight, who passed away at the age of 99 about 10 years ago. She always shared with people that when she stopped thinking about tithing and actually started doing it, it changed her life. God blessed her in amazing ways. But you have to do it, not just say it. Faith is the same way. We have to actually go into the vineyard to work, not just say that we’re going to go. When we join a Bible study, engage in mission, spend time in prayer and pastoral care, come to worship every week, that’s when our faith will grow.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 60-61.

Finally, this parable shows that for many people, trusting in the faithfulness and goodness of God takes time. “But time is in the gospel’s favor, because over time, the truth will win out” (Palmer). The more you think about it, the better it is. The more the No Brother thought about the will of God, the more sense it made.

The first boy thought about it, and so he went into the vineyard. What about us? Whether we say yes or no to Jesus is apparently less important to him than what we actually do. The important thing is what our lives say, not just what our mouths say. When we look in the mirror, what do we see moving: our mouths or our feet? Amen.