

The Difference Between 'Yes' and 'No'

The Parable of the Two Sons

Matthew 21:23-32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Some months of the year have 30 days, some months have 31 days. How many months of the year have 28 days? Some of you may be thinking: Just one – February. But the correct answer is 12 – all of them have 28 days. ☺

Yes, that was a trick question. Sometimes trick questions are fun, sometimes not. In our gospel reading for this morning, from Matthew 21, Jesus and the chief priests and religious elders have a discussion that is filled with trick questions.

First, the chief priests and elders ask Jesus where he gets his authority to teach and heal. What they are actually trying to do, however, is to trap him into saying something they can use against him. In the context of Matthew's gospel, this story occurs soon after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in what will be the last week of his life – a time of many confrontations with religious leaders.

Wise enough to recognize their intentions, Jesus sees through their ploy and responds by asking a trick question of his own, having to do with John the Baptist and where he gets his authority from. It is such a clever question that any answer the chief priests and elders give will back them into a corner. So what do they do? They play dumb. After discussing the options and implications of their answer – the modern day equivalent of taking an opinion poll – they take refuge in, "We don't know."

Now, **"We don't know" can be a legitimate response. In fact, Christianity would be a lot better off today if more religious leaders were less absolute in their answers, choosing instead to simply respond with an honest "I don't know."** God never intended for us to know all the answers, and earlier in this gospel we are even told that we should never claim to know more than we do.

So yes, "We do not know" can be a very Christian confession of faith. But *not* in the specific case of the chief priests and elders in this story. As the religious leaders of Judaism, it was their responsibility to know who was and was not a false prophet. But they knew that whatever answer they gave would get them into trouble. So instead, they choose a path of non-commitment, which, ironically, betrays their commitment.

This brings up an important question. **On the flip side of not claiming to know more than one knows, does not a person (especially one in a leadership**

position) who does know the answer have an obligation to tell the truth when asked? This biblical story offers a good principle for us. **Those unwilling to answer questions should not ask them.**

Since the religious leaders will not answer Jesus' question about authority, Jesus refuses to answer theirs. Instead, he tells them a parable (which is found only here in the Matthew's gospel).

A parent has two children and directs the first to go and work in the vineyard. This one says "No, I will not", but then has a change of mind and obediently goes and does the work. The second one is given the same directive, verbally agrees to do the work that is asked, but does not go and do it.

Jesus follows this simple story with a simple question, "**Which of these two children did the will of the parent?**" The answer is intentionally obvious: **the one who was eventually obedient and followed the parent's instructions.**

But this turns out to be another trick question, because in application, when asked to reflect upon their work in furthering the kingdom of God, the religious leaders end up being portrayed as the one who say "yes" but *doesn't* actually follow the will God.

They may have looked and sounded very religious, especially in their observance of all the legalistic rules, but **what about the greater issues of furthering the kingdom of God**, such as loving one's neighbor, being peacemakers, seeking justice, offering mercy and forgiveness, and demonstrating kindness and compassion?

The remarkable wonder of Jesus' parables is that they act as a mirror for us to look into, and they only have significance if we can see ourselves reflected in them. So it's important to ask: **Where do you see yourself in this parable? Where do we see College Hill in this parable? As the one who says "yes" but doesn't follow through; as the one who says "no" but then has a change of mind and does the work of God;** or even as the one in the leadership position who asks another to do the work? Perhaps we find ourselves in all these roles from time to time. The note of grace is that in no matter which way we choose to speak and act, we are all still children of God.

But that doesn't let us off the hook. The traditional, and certainly acceptable, application of this parable is that **God requires deeds and action rather than empty words. Practice is more important than profession.** But it's not quite that simple. When asked the question a few moments ago about where you saw yourself in this parable, many of us may have found ourselves (like the chief priests and elders) leaning toward the one who says "yes" but doesn't follow through.

As an aside, there are many who suffer from the inability to say 'no'. So they say yes, but then feel guilty when they don't follow through. There is indeed a warning here in situations like this for us to not get over-committed and over-busy. **Many of us need to remember that we are human beings, not human doings.**

There is still the expectation, however, that when a person says they will do something, they will follow through – and that's not an unrealistic expectation. Just ask any parent who tells a child to clean their room or do a chore. And when we say 'yes we are going to work in the vineyard today,' let us make sure we actually do the work of harvesting the grapes, instead of spending our time rearranging the stones along the path!

I want us to focus now on the one who says no, but does yes. There is more here than the simple lesson that we are to do the will of God. There's another step involved. We are told in the parable that the one who said no had a *change of mind* and then went to work in the vineyard. It's easy to just skip right over this important aspect in this process – changing one's mind, or as we often put it today, having a change of heart, or in theological terms, repenting.

In Jesus' parable, it was the change of mind and heart that mattered, not social standing or moral background. That is why Jesus could say that tax collectors and prostitutes who recognized their sinfulness and waywardness would enter the kingdom of God before the religious leaders who already considered themselves holy and not in need of change.

On a personal and individual level, what would it take for you to know yourself well enough, and be open and honest enough with yourself, to recognize that there may be a change that is necessary in your life, whether it be a change of heart, mind, or actions? Is there anything that you are currently discerning that you may need to change your heart, mind or actions about?

Extending this to a church level, we can ask the same questions. What would it take for us here at College Hill to know our church well enough, and be open and honest enough with ourselves to recognize that there may be a change that is necessary in our church life? Is there anything that we are currently discerning that we may need to change our heart, mind or actions about?

I'm not going to attempt to answer any of those questions this morning. But we would all be better off if we continually kept these questions on the forefront of our minds and prayers.

I specifically did spend some time reflecting on these things during this past week when I was on **study leave**. This is the fourth year in a row that a group of 5 church professionals that I am a part of have gone to one of our group's ancestral family farm in the rolling and forested hills and farmland of north central Ohio. Each of us engage in our own study and reflection. We also eat a lot, get lots of rest, take long walks in the countryside, visit the nearby small Mennonite country stores, and watch the Amish ride by on their horse-drawn buggies. I also engage in my favorite hobby of photography.

For this year's study leave I chose to read a book that was highly recommended by Stanley Ott, the national leader of the Acts 16:5 Initiative of church transformation. The book is entitled, **Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within by Robert E. Quinn**. I found it to be a very profound analysis of the

phenomenon that both individuals and organizations go through in **choosing either deep change or slow death.**

There are many important implications that can be applied to the situations of our own personal lives, and in our life together as a congregation. You will be hearing more about this in the future, especially those of you serving in leadership positions and as Elders on the Session.

But it all reminded me of Jesus' parable that **a change of heart and mind (perhaps deep change) is often necessary before we can fully engage in the work of doing God's will of building and furthering the kingdom of God.** And perhaps when we recall this parable in the weeks ahead, we can all pause and think twice before we answer yes or no, and then reflect upon how our actions follow our words.

Amen.