

Listen again to a portion of our Gospel lesson from St. Matthew's gospel:

28"But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' 29"He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. 30"Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. 31"Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. 32"For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."

The second son in the parable said, "I will go and work in the vineyard," but he didn't do it. So here is the question: what did he do instead? For years, I suppose I naturally assumed that he parked himself under a tree, took a nap, ate some chips and read his favorite magazine while the world around him made an honest living. Perhaps the parable has struck you that way as well: if the guy wasn't working in the family vineyard, it meant that he wasn't working.

However, if that is our assumption, we need to reevaluate the text. Our Lord doesn't tell us what the son did when he didn't go into the vineyard. But from the context of Matthew 21, I'm going to make this proposal this morning: instead of working in the vineyard, the son was doing other things. He was working hard to make sure that society was running well, lobbying for legislation to keep the streets safe day and night. He was setting a good example to other of how to live. He was championing morality. He was trumpeting purity. He was challenging people to apply themselves, work hard, and do their very best.

I suggest that's what the son was doing when he didn't go work in dad's vineyard. And for this, Jesus gives him no praise at all.

If this is the situation, would this surprise you, or be unsettling? A look at the context will help. Matthew 21 begins with Palm Sunday, with Jesus entering Jerusalem triumphantly as the crowds shout out "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" The multitude of

pilgrims rejoice to see Him enter the city, because they believe Him to be the long-awaited Savior. They know their sin—their lack of holiness before God, and they believe that Jesus has come to save them. Everyone's happy to see Jesus arrive. Everyone, that is, except the Pharisees.

The Pharisees consider themselves the glue that holds society together, and this has some merit to it. They're the moral majority of their time, insisting that there be laws to enforce morality and making sure that those who sin face public shame for their unrighteousness. Their strict rules and manner encourage people to do their best, lest they face the wrath of the Sanhedrin—the council of the Pharisees. All in all, the streets are probably safer at night because the Pharisees are around.

There's a problem, though: they despise Jesus. They want Him dead. You'd think that the Pharisees and Jesus would get along fine, since both declare that God demands purity. However, the two oppose each other for one reason: the Pharisees teach that you must make yourself pure in order to earn God's approval. They teach righteousness by works. Jesus, on the other hand, teaches that you can't make yourself pure. You're too sinful. That's why He has come—to redeem you from your sin and make you pure. So when it comes to righteousness and salvation, Jesus and the Pharisees are teaching opposite things.

So no matter what sort of valuable service the Pharisees render to society, Jesus still rebukes them at every turn: while they might improve life in the world for a short time, they're sending people to hell by teaching them that they work their way to heaven.

And it's to the Pharisees that Jesus tells this parable, rebuking them once again, so let's take a look. Several of Jesus' parables involve a vineyard, and the vineyard stands for His kingdom. The lord of the vineyard is the Lord God. The workers in the vineyard are the people of God, and note this carefully: the workers are not there because they applied for a job or earned the place. The workers are there because the Lord has called them. He's spoken His Word to them and thus brought them into the vineyard. Clearly, this is how the Lord saves: He speaks His faith-giving Word; and people hear, believe and thus are His people. Those outside the vineyard are those who do not believe. They may be doing admirable things for

society, but they have no true faith in the Lord.

It is vital that we understand what this parable is about: it is not about how one son obeys his father and works while the other one slacks off under a tree. It is not about the works of the people. This parable is about the truth that God speaks His Word; and, that by His Word and through His Word, He makes for Himself children who dwell in His kingdom forever.

When Jesus tells this parable, His point is this: the tax collectors and harlots were living terrible lives, and at first said “no” to the Lord. However, hearing Jesus declare the Word, they have believed in Him and are now in the vineyard—they are part of God’s people. On the other hand, the Pharisees from the very start have claimed to say “yes” to God, and have declared they are going about His work. However, because they deny their sin and their need for a Savior, and do not believe in Jesus, they are outside of the vineyard. Despite their morality and good example, they are not part of the people of God.

Sometimes, this parable is mistaken to teach, “Obey God, always say ‘yes’ to Him, and don’t fall away. If you’ve said ‘no’ before, then start saying ‘yes’ while there’s still time.” While the Law demands such obedience, this parable is not an exhortation to obey. Instead, it warns against believing that you can save yourself by your own works. And then, it announces the joy that you are saved—not by your works and good behavior, but by the gift of forgiveness the Lord gives to you in His Word. It is not your obedience that saves you, but Jesus’ obedience on your behalf—even to death on the cross for your sins.

A bit with tongue-in-cheek, I’ve entitled the second half of this sermon, “Relevance, Practicality, and Other Dangers to the Church.”

I do not mean to say that the Church is irrelevant and impractical, that we have nothing to offer to the world today. In fact, the message of the Gospel is more relevant than any other: everyone is going to die, and only the Gospel gives a resurrection from death to everlasting life. This is for 100% of the population: can’t be much more relevant than that. Likewise, consider the practicality of the Gospel. The Good News of Christ and Him crucified doesn’t offer a hazy proposal of salvation in the future: it gives

All of these troubles are doubtless very real. All of these tear at the fabric of society and leave the world a worse place for it. Thus many a sermon has turned from the preaching of Christ-crucified to motivational sermons of self-help and how-to. And indeed, those who have no faith can still understand the need for moral purity/chastity, living within your means, racial equality and care for neighbor.

However, here is the warning that the Lord gives in this parable. It is quite possible to be a chaste, financially solvent, unprejudiced volunteer and still be condemned in sin. While many have departed the faith for promiscuity, none have ever saved themselves by virginity. While greed and debt have driven many to despair, contentment has never won eternal life. Bigotry engenders hatred, but man's tolerance does not engender God's love. If someone reveres chastity, contentment, fairness and love, but still lacks faith, then he will be a credit to society—but he is still living outside of the vineyard. As Jesus said, repentant tax collectors and harlots were entering the kingdom of heaven while unbelieving Pharisees were not—even though the Pharisees were helping out society much more. Or, to put it another way: nowhere in Scripture does it say that the Lord rejoices over unprejudiced and financially-wise virgins who care for their neighbor. But the angels do rejoice when one sinner repents.

The mission of the Church is not to teach people to be moral unbelievers, improvers of society while leaving its hearers condemned. The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified, because this Good News forgives sins, gives faith and eternal life.

Does that mean we should not worry about promiscuity, greed, bigotry and callousness toward others? Absolutely not! But understand that much of this lies far more in the location of home and the vocation of parenting. Parents, it is given to you to teach your children proper manners and behaviors, to train them to be citizens in this world. All too often, grown-ups fail to teach these lessons. All too often, they spend their time leering at the latest spectacle of lust on TV, indulging their prejudices and financing their dreams—and then blame the Church when their children have trouble with morality, bigotry and greed...and sneering at the Word that is proclaimed.



forgiveness, salvation and eternal life to you right now. It declares that you are at peace with God, that He will use all things for your good. Done deal. Can't get much more practical than that.

However, you and I both know that the Gospel is only received by God-given faith. Since those outside the vineyard of the Church don't have faith, they don't see the relevance or practicality of the Gospel. Instead, the Church is irrelevant, impractical, if not pesky and annoying. Here is the great temptation for the Church today: in the desire to reach out and evangelize, many believe we should make ourselves relevant and practical to those who have no faith. Rather than rely on the work of the Holy Spirit to turn sinners to repentance by the proclamation of the Bible, many say that Christians should proclaim world-friendly messages instead, and get to the Gospel sometime later on.

What are some of the greatest temptations and troubles in our society today? Immorality comes to mind. Despite the carnal paradise portrayed in magazines and on TV, promiscuity is the quick route to disease, an inability to truly love, shattered dreams exchanged for single parenting, even an early death. Indeed, next perhaps to mainlining illegal narcotics, there are few things that can derail and destroy your plans more permanently than promiscuity.

Materialism is another great danger. Many are captivated by greed and must have the latest gizmos and fashions, overextending themselves until they can barely pay the interest on their credit cards. Results can include foreclosure, bankruptcy, and draining resources from parents and others in order to cover your debts. The stress can destroy marriages, family and health.

There is no doubt that bigotry is a sin, and there is no doubt that bigotry is still alive and well in our nation today. Such prejudices foster and maintain suspicion, distrust and a terrible pride, leading to unrest and all kinds of sin.

Love for neighbor seems to be on the back burner these days, except for the occasional disaster relief drive. It would certainly be beneficial in society if people helped each other more.

You and I will constantly face the temptation of frustration with the Gospel. We will declare the truth of Jesus' cross and see little in the way of harvest, and wonder what is wrong. We might even confront a text like this one and say, "Shouldn't we focus on texts that are more pertinent?" The fact that we ask such a question shows the need for this parable: we value the work that people do over the Word that the Lord proclaims. We measure Christianity by what we see, not by the promise of grace and life that we hear. Lord, have mercy upon us, and continue to declare to us the miracle of salvation in Jesus Christ.

For behold the Good News that the Lord declares, that salvation is the work of the Lord. You are in the vineyard solely because of what Jesus has done! Psalm 25, the psalm for today states: Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; According to Your mercy remember me, For Your goodness' sake, O LORD (Ps. 25:7).

How horrible it would be if the message of salvation went like this: "As long as you've led a good enough life, you are forgiven. But if you messed up with sex or drugs or crime or whatever when you were young, there is no hope for you to get into the vineyard." Heaven would be sparsely populated indeed. But the Gospel goes differently: The Lord declares, "I know the sins of your youth, and My Son died to take them away. Therefore, I justify you. I declare you not guilty of your sin for Jesus' sake, and I welcome you into the vineyard."

In the Old Testament lesson, you heard, "What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live," says the Lord GOD, "you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel. (Ezek. 18:2-3)

Man has taught often enough that one could be saved if he were part of the right family or race, and that the sins of one's parents could leave one condemned with no hope. But that is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who died for all. Instead of leaving you in your sin or the sins of your forebears, the Lord calls you into His vineyard, saying, "For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies. "Therefore turn and live!" (Ezek. 18:32)

In the Epistle, you heard, "And being found in appearance as a man, [Jesus] humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). Rather than declare, "If you're humble enough and never give in to greed or pride, then I'll save you," the Lord says, "Jesus humbled Himself and died for your sins. This is the news in which we rejoice, because this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Once, you were outside of the vineyard, condemned no matter what you did. But the Holy Ghost has called you by the Gospel, sanctified and kept you in the true faith—He has brought you into the vineyard of God's kingdom solely by His grace. In this kingdom, we rejoice to keep God's law; and by the faith He gives, we live chaste, content and helpful lives. Where we sin, we give thanks for forgiveness, that the Lord removes our sin so that we remain in the vineyard. And as we hear of Jesus' forgiveness for us, we rejoice to proclaim that seemingly irrelevant/impractical Gospel to all who will hear—so that they might be brought into the vineyard for eternal life, too.

For there is one message, one Word which brings such salvation: "You are forgiven for all of your sins." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen