

September 27, 2020  
26th Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people: "What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' He said in reply, 'I will not,' but afterwards he changed his mind and went. The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, 'Yes, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did his father's will?" They answered, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

### **Background:**

In the final line of last week's gospel, Jesus declared that the last will be first and the first will be last (Matthew 20:16). As Matthew's gospel continues from that point, he next describes these events: Jesus' third and last prediction of his suffering and death, the mother of James and John approaches to ask that her sons sit on the right and left when Jesus comes into his kingdom, the disciples' reaction to her request, and Jesus' instruction on the use of authority. The 20th chapter of Matthew ends with Jesus healing a blind man.

The 21st chapter of Matthew begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem riding a donkey and the crowds crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David." Then, Jesus enters the temple area and overturns the tables of the moneychangers and those selling doves to the pilgrims for offerings. The chief priests and the scribes confront Jesus. The following morning, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, he curses a fig tree because it has not borne fruit and it dies immediately. As Jesus is teaching in the temple area, the chief priests and the elders question his authority. Jesus says that he will respond to their question if they will tell him where John the Baptist got his authority. This interchange between the Pharisees and Jesus leads to the parable that is the text for today's gospel.

Stories about two sons were a familiar way of making a point. The stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16) and Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:23-27:46) are well known. The prophet Ezekiel tells the story of two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, who represent Samaria and Jerusalem in his story (Ezekiel 23:1-49). In today's gospel, the son who refuses to go to work in the vineyard has broken with accepted norms of behavior and insulted his father, who would typically have had the legal right to punish him and even put him to death.

Jesus is very shrewd in the way he phrases the question he puts to the chief priests and the elders. He does not ask which son has honored his father. People of the day valued honor more than obedience. To their way of thinking, the son who only said he would work in the vineyard was more honorable than the one who said he would not. It may be helpful to know that there are no private conversations in this culture. The questions and the responses of the two sons are presumed to be known by the whole community. The son who said he would go and work in the vineyard honored his father, while his brother's response was an embarrassment.

But Jesus has asked who actually did what the father asked of him. Jesus is implying that those he is addressing are like the first son, who in appearance says the right thing, but whose actions are lacking. In fact, their maintaining a virtuous appearance was preventing them from responding with care and compassion to many of the very people with whom Jesus commonly associated, the sinners and those on the fringes. Jesus does not say to them that they will not enter heaven, but he does say that tax collectors and sinners will enter before them. Many of the sinners were those baptized by John, who had then changed their lives. Many of the religious leaders were also baptized by John, but their baptisms did not lead to the same kind of change in the way they lived their daily lives.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Have you ever felt the need to say the right things in order to maintain appearances or to respect the authority of another?

2. Have you also felt the need to speak to the reality of a situation, even if it was unsettling to those in authority?
3. Are you aware of a time or two when people said things to you publicly that were not flattering? Were you more upset by what was said, or by the unflattering circumstance?
4. How are you personally dealing with the very public arguments that are taking place in our communities, our country, and our world?
5. Can you take some time to talk with God about your experience of trying to show respect and speak the truth about things that you believe need to change?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to [annemarie.lom@gmail.com](mailto:annemarie.lom@gmail.com)

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### **Excerpts from the readings for September 27, 2020, the Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Thus says the Lord: You say, "The Lord's way is not fair!"  
Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?  
When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies,  
it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die.  
But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, he does what is right and just,  
he shall preserve his life; since he has turned away from all the sins  
that he has committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.

Remember your mercies, O Lord. Your ways, O Lord, make known to me;  
teach me your paths, guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.  
Remember that your compassion, O Lord, and your love are from of old.  
The sins of my youth and my frailties remember not; in your kindness remember me,  
because of your goodness, O Lord. Good and upright is the Lord; thus he shows sinners the way.  
He guides the humble to justice, and teaches the humble his way.

Brothers and sisters: If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.

Do nothing out of selfishness; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.

Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus,

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness;

and found human in appearance, he humbled himself,

becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name

which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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Which of the two did his father's will?" They answered, "The first."

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are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came to you in the way of righteousness,

you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did.

Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him."

**Excerpts from Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25:4-9; Philippians 2:1-11; and Matthew 21:28-32**