



Bible Study

August 5, 2015

I Corinthians 16:4-12

Matthew 21:28-32

I Corinthians 16:4-12 (NKJV) -

But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me. Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia). And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits. But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. And if Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear; for he does the work of the Lord, as I also do. Therefore let no one despise him. But send him on his journey in peace, that he may come to me; for I am waiting for him with the brethren. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to come to you with the brethren, but he was quite unwilling to come at this time; however, he will come when he has a convenient time.

Matthew 21:28-32 (NKJV) – The Lord said, “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.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. 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. 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.”

Commentary -

In today's Gospel reading, our Lord uses a parable to delineate two attitudes which people can take with regard to the Lord's Word once they have heard it. One response is all too common, the other not common enough. And perhaps even more importantly, the response which the Lord desires is the one opposite to the one which his initial hearers might typically expect. Ultimately, beyond just two different ways of receiving Christ when He is encountered, we see here two very different views of what obedience looks like, and what it means to be one of God's people.

In the parable, Christ tells us of two brothers, both of whom are asked by their father to do certain work for him on his estate. One brother immediately and obligingly agrees to go out and the do

the work. The other rather stubbornly refused. Then, however, as the day wore on, the brother who had at first been so agreeable to his father's will had a change of heart and failed to follow through on actually doing the work his father wanted. The brother who had refused, on the other hand, also had a change of heart and went out and did the work. Christ then asks which one truly obeyed his father, and the answer is obvious, the one who did as his father willed, despite what he had said, rather than the one who failed to, also despite his initial statements.

In modern British English, the word 'Christian' is often used to refer not to anything religious per se, but as a synonym for 'proper'. So, for example, one's 'Christian name' is one's proper, legal name. One is considered to be 'being Christian' about some matter if one behaves in a respectable, polite way according to cultural standards of manners. Though it is not enshrined in the language in such a way everywhere, this usage reveals a common misperception of what it means to be a 'religious person' or a 'godly person' or a 'pious person' within society, and this misperception is nothing new in our day, it existed in the days when our Lord Jesus Christ walked the earth in Palestine, and before that into the Old Testament.

The culture around us, and in Judea in the first century A.D., consider piety to be living in a certain respectful way. Respectful not only of the god or gods whom one worships, but also of those whom one doesn't worship. To be pious was to be clean in a ceremonial way, to dress and act a certain way, speak in a certain way, associate with certain people and to disassociate one's self from certain others, and to generally behave in a way considered proper and polite. That the first century Judean set of cultural mores was based on the Torah, the Old Testament Law or Teaching of God, at least in large part, did not significantly distinguish this view in their case any more than it distinguishes this view in our era that it is, at least somewhat, based on the Christian Bible. Whether held by Jews, Christians, or pagans, this view holds that what God fundamentally expects from us is certain forms of outward behavior and association in our public lives, and that meeting these standards of what we do and don't do, where we do and don't go, what we do and don't eat, who we do and don't associate with, or saying particular things makes us a good Jew, or a good Christian, or a good Roman, or a fine American. Those who don't look or present themselves or behave in what we have collectively decided is the correct way are then not only outcasts to be avoided, but quickly become despised and looked at as the enemy, whether they be the tax collectors and harlots of Jesus day, or the equivalent in our own.

What Christ's parable reveals is that for a great many of us, this outward obedience, the performance which we set forth before the world and the general public, is disconnected from anything that is really going on in our heart and soul. It is all on the surface, and if one scratches that surface, one finds nothing beneath. While we very publicly, loudly, and for as many as possible to hear say, "Yes, Lord!" and identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, our heart is far from him, and if we are honest, we have far more in common with the sinners whom we would publicly never want to be seen than with the person we pretend to be.

And so, those whom we consider sinners and beneath us, those whom our culture deems the 'bad' and the 'worthless' and the 'wicked', when presented with the reality of Jesus Christ, see a way out of the darkness that their choices have led them into and find repentance. In finding repentance, they find salvation, and they enter into the Kingdom of Heaven before us. But as Christ so rightly observed, even seeing their repentance, even seeing those whom we would consider the 'lowest of the low' being transformed and redeemed in the Image of their Creator, is not enough for us to find repentance. It might provoke in us some bitterness, or jealousy, or resentment over them receiving blessings that they 'don't deserve', unlike ourselves, but little else.

But thankfully, in His mercy and love toward mankind, Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners like us to repentance, even the hypocrites. Even the phonies. Even those who have publicly declared their love for Him a thousand times but whose heart has always been far from Him. It is, in the end, not those who receive the Word of God with initial joy that find salvation, but those who follow through in a life following His will; not those who hear the Word, but those who do it, and

in doing it, are transformed by it. It is never too late for us, like the son of Christ's parables, compare who we actually are with who we have been claiming to be, and regretting the course we have taken, to come back and do the Father's will. As a loving Father He wishes none of His children to end their lives in condemnation, but that all should turn and live with Him forevermore.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) Over and over again throughout the Scriptures, the Lord acknowledge that those who hear the word, and those who do it, those who put it into practice in how they live their lives, are all too often two different groups of people. St. James compares this to looking into a mirror, and then immediately forgetting what one looks like. When you encounter spiritual truth, wherever it may be, do you nod your head, or click "Like", and then go on as if you never encountered it? When God gives you spiritual insight, do you attempt to change the way you live your life from day to day accordingly, or do you just pass on unmoved? Does what you see and hear and taste and touch and smell on Sunday at Liturgy leave the Liturgy with you and enter into the rest of your week?
- 2) Our Lord teaches us in today's Gospel that repentance and real obedience are better in His sight than outward agreement and conformity. When you spend your time and money and effort in regard to the Church, which of these are you pursuing? Do you seek recognition for your time and effort and giving, or do you seek to serve? Do you spend more time before going to Liturgy concerned with your and your family's physical appearance and dress, or the state of your souls and your readiness to receive the Lord's Body and Blood?
- 3) In today's epistle reading, St. Paul shows his priorities regarding the church in Corinth. Despite all of the work and effort he has spent there and with the people gathered there, he does not seek to claim some kind of ownership, or keep St. Timothy or Apollos away out of some jealousy. Rather, he urges the people there to receive them. For St. Paul, the work of bringing the people of Corinth to Christ, and helping them find their way to His Kingdom, is more important than his own ego. When you look at the work in your church, do you see it as belonging to Christ, and seek areas where you can serve, or have you tried to carve out some fiefdom for yourself? Do you look at it as 'your church' and seek to control it, or as Christ's church, and follow His lead, and the leadership that He has put in place there? Do you seek to serve there, or try to rule there?

Questions or Comments? FrStephen@stgeorgecharleston.org

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