

“Walking the Talk”  
Matthew 21:23-32

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As you consider the parable Jesus told the Pharisees in this morning's Gospel reading, what do you think about the choices Jesus presents? Here, we have two sons. The father tells each one to go and do some work in the garden. Some weeding, some pruning, picking away the bad fruit—whatever is typical work to be done in a vineyard. It's not too much to ask, kind of like mowing the lawn every other week. Parents often ask their kids to do a few chores around the house each week—running the vacuum, taking out the trash, raking the leaves. After all, the average cost of raising a child to 18 is right around \$233,000—and that doesn't include college. I don't believe in slave labor, but it's the least they can do to earn their keep.

So, in our parable, this particular father asks his sons to do a little work in the vineyard. And their response? One of them says "No," and then does it; the other one says "Yes, Dad, I'll be glad to," and then doesn't. As both a father and a son, I can tell you that neither scenario is going to please a father. In the first, the father's anger will be immediate, but will dissolve later. In the second, the father will be pleased at first, but when he realizes that his son failed to keep his promise—well, those of you who have raised teens might be familiar with what the father's reaction might be.

By the way, how many of you have raised teens, are currently raising teens, or will be raising teens? As Paul Lynde sang in the movie version of *Bye, Bye, Birdie*. "Kids! I don't know what's wrong with these kids today. Kids! Who can understand anything they say?"

*A son was home from college for fall break, and his father tried to talk to him about how college was going:*

*The father said, "How are things going at school?"*

*The son said, "Fine."*

*The father said, "How is the dorm?"*

*He said, "Fine."*

*The father said, "How is the food in the cafeteria?"*

*He said, "Fine."*

*The father said, "How are your studies going?"*

*He said, "Fine."*

*The father said, "Have you decided on a major yet?"*

*He said, "Yes."*

*"Well, what is it?" asked the father.*

*The son said, "Interpersonal Communications."*

I was a Speech Communications and Theater major in college, and I don't think I talked to my father that much.

Of course, Jesus isn't really trying to give the Pharisees a lesson on raising kids. What he is doing is comparing the behavior of the Pharisees and those on the fringes of society to that of

unpredictable children. The Pharisees talk the talk but don't walk the walk. I guess you could say that those on the fringes of society—people like tax collectors and prostitutes—don't talk the talk, but they do walk the walk.

Now, the Pharisees were not really bad people; actually, they were the people that were able to hold the Jewish traditions together at a time when, under the Roman occupation, there were many other religions being practiced in the Jewish communities. They had authority in the community, and knowledge of the Law. Not only did they strive to keep the Law themselves, but they also made sure that the Jews in the community also kept the Law. They knew that they were not sinless. They went to church regularly. They read the Jewish Scriptures daily. They regularly went to Scripture studies. They tithed and they kept their pledges paid up. Sounds a lot like a regular churchgoer today, doesn't it? We do the same things, as a way to honor Jesus and glorify God. So, why did Jesus have such a problem with them—and why did they have such a problem with Jesus?

In reality, they were a pretty sanctimonious group. Not only did they hold everyone to the absolute letter of the Law, but their interpretation of the Law made it even more difficult to keep than it was originally written by Moses. And, if you looked at their behavior closely, you would see that their commitment to serving others was really quite shallow. They were concerned mostly about themselves. They weren't really concerned with helping people get right with God; they were much more concerned with telling other people why they weren't right with God.

Think about the story of the Good Samaritan. We have the priest who, coming upon the man who had been beaten, "pass by on the other side." Now, the priest was probably extremely competent in handling all of the details in the temple—candles, incense, scrolls, and sacrifices. The temple was probably where he spent most of his time. But, what he could not handle was an injured man on the Jericho road—this servant of God was more concerned with the Mosaic Laws of cleanliness than he was with showing compassion to an injured man.

Now, I am going to tell you a little secret about pastors. Most pastors are just like that. Very competent when hanging around the church: prayers, hymns, sermons, Sunday school lessons, pastoral counseling, and all the other jobs a pastor does for the church; but the trouble comes in handling the events on the Jericho road—when faced with real situations in the real world. Just like most Christians, we often have trouble living out our Christianity in those places where we live and work and play. Like most people, we have trouble in our relationships with our spouses, and our parents, and our children, and our friends, and our colleagues. Just like deacons and elders, we take vows at our ordination. We promise to do all kinds of wonderfully Christian things, and then we go out and whatever cloak we wear when we are in the church, seems to mysteriously disappear.

This is the kind of behavior that Jesus was condemning in his parable and conversation with the Pharisees. Although Martin Luther called the Book of James an "Epistle of straw," James did pick up on what Jesus was trying to say when he wrote, "Faith without works is dead." I like to interpret James' words by saying that, "If you claim to be a follower of Jesus, but it doesn't show in how you live your life, then perhaps you need a refresher course in discipleship."

If Jesus were to walk into a church on a Sunday morning, what might he say to the congregation? *"Mahatma Gandhi had a better shot at getting into heaven than most Americans who go to church every week because he really lived what I was trying to teach. And those who ladle up bowls of hot soup at a homeless shelter have a better shot at getting into heaven than those who quarrel over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary!"*

If this parable makes you uncomfortable, that is probably a good thing. It makes me uncomfortable. A wise friend recently reminded me that a seminary diploma is just a piece of paper. Contrary to what some pastors may try to tell you, a seminary degree is not an automatic ticket to heaven. As hard as it may be for us to accept, Jesus is saying that those who are struggling with their faith, but live it as if they have it, have a better shot at salvation than those who profess their faith, but don't live it.

The distinction in this parable is not simply between saying we have faith and actually living out our faith. The real crux of the matter has to do with accepting or rejecting Christ. What does it mean to be "in Christ?" It means imitating Christ's life every day. And how do we do that? By thinking of the needs of others, before we think of our own needs. By reaching outside of our comfort zones to touch the people that society shuns, but are important to God.

Think critically about the way you live your life. Have you accepted Christ in your words, but rejected him in the way you live your life and in the way you treat others? Or, does your love and dedication to Christ reach beyond words and feelings, and reach out into everything you do and everyone you touch? AMEN