

³¹***“Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered.***

Two sons, the one compliant agreeable and apparently willing to offer his help to do the work that the Father considers so important, the other determined to go his own way, belligerent, argumentative and even rude. With one curt refusal he dismisses everything his father stands for, making no attempt to explain or to justify himself he just says an emphatic, No! ***‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’*** ²⁹***“I will not,” he answered.***

Nothing could be more dramatic or plain and once more, with just a few deft brushstrokes Jesus paints a vivid picture that challenges everything that we are. Nowadays of course if He was to tell that same parable on Peebles High Street it would have a very different reception. The focus today would not be on the sons at all. The immediate reaction would be to criticise the father;

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

How dare he impose his moral imperatives on his sons and demand work from them when they don't want to give it? What about their basic human rights? What are the wages and conditions? Where is the job description? Has a proper health and safety risk assessment been done? Why should they go and slave at the mere whim of someone else, especially their father? This is a kind of moral blackmail, imposing his out of date work-ethic and outmoded moralistic ideas of duty on a new generation that is trying to seek its own way! Many would consider that the son who eventually gave in and went into the vineyard was merely reinforcing an exploitative relationship. In this post modern age it's the Father who's the villain of the piece. That's a measure of how far we've come from the assumptions that lay behind Jesus simple illustration.

Even with that interpretation the story is still relevant for us because sadly, that is precisely how many people feel about God. They don't mind believing in the existence of God and they find the rituals of faith helpful and comforting but when God asks us to be part of a spiritual battle or challenges us as to the way we live our lives, it's too much.

That is to impose a moral agenda; that involves commitment and sacrifice; that describes a God who shapes and moulds us according to his pattern rather than a God who simply accepts us as we are and leaves us as we are. It smacks to modern ears of manipulation and demand on the part of God and we will not have that. This parable of Jesus speaks to our day and generation in a completely different way than it did then but just as powerfully.

For Jesus the aim was to expose the hardness of heart and complacency of the scribes and Pharisees who heard him speak of repentance and faith but were not willing to take the message to themselves. They had come to rely on their historical status as the children of God without taking on what it really meant. They were His children in name only. On the surface they heard the Father's call to serve him in the vineyard and felt that they were his true children the very ones who should be asked. On the surface they were saying yes we are the rightful heirs but when it came down to it nothing changed, nothing was happening. They saw themselves as the obedient ones but they were not listening to the Father or responding to his word.

When Jesus came along, the Word made flesh and challenged them they didn't like it because the call of the Father to work in his vineyard would involve repentance and a change of heart and mind and life. Were they not God's children? Why should he be disappointed in them? They were not prepared to embrace what sonship meant they just liked the idea of it.

They rejected the moral and spiritual challenge that he presented to them. When John the Baptist had preached before Jesus they had rejected his message then too. I was not for them and it is this that Jesus takes issue with.

Many people look on God as if he owes them something and if he doesn't seem to come up with the goods then they are resentful and angry. Did they not deserve a bit of consideration? Were they not true children of the father? Had they not done their bit? Were they not due a bit of leeway, some time for themselves? Did they not have a right to a happy life untroubled and untrammelled by all this obedience? When Jesus urges them to take up a cross of pain, or suffering, of sacrifice or service and follow after him it's simply too much. This is not what we signed up for with God. I'm all in favour of God I mean the answer is yes, sure but not this. You ask too much.

There is another appeal for money to feed the hungry or for the work of the kingdom and we sigh, not again, let someone else respond. We are asked whether prayer is a good idea and we say yes, of course it is for we know that is the right answer but don't ask me to come and do it, to make the time, to answer the call of him who says, "go on asking, long after you think your father must be tired of you", let some else respond. We know there are some things we ought to give up or change in our lives but the sacrifice is too great, let someone else respond.

Don't think, I am a child of God so I don't need to pay attention to him, He won't mind.
Remember the two sons. Which one was faithful?

If the second son said yes and then failed to do what his father wanted the first son was, at first downright rude. In a conservative society there would have been a sharp intake of breath at his outright refusal of the father's request.

This son was wayward and wilful. He seemed to have no interest in serving anyone but himself for years he had done his own thing, wild and uncontrollable but he heard the voice of his father, a voice that he loved in spite of himself and his selfish ways. His heart was stirred and he took a thought to himself. There was a change of heart and mind.

The man who had said no, felt real sorrow that he should be so unloving to the Father who had given him everything causing him such pain and he comes full of shame with head down, unworthy to be called a child but longing to do what his Father had asked. All around Jesus people who had lived lives without God were hearing and responding and slipping quietly into the kingdom.

³²John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did.

The powerful cry of John the Baptist was, "repent and do it quickly, turn away from rebellion, hear the father's voice and come work in the vineyard with him". Those who heard and responded were the sinners who recognised their need of change, sick and fed up of what they were and what they had become. They longed to put it all away and come and be healed. Although they had said no to God in the past they recognised his voice and in sorrow wanted now to come. Gingerly they slipped into the vineyard knowing their shame, feeling unworthy. They couldn't march in demanding their rightful place but they left all their selfishness and sinfulness behind to enter into the joy of the father.

Here were the folks who had apparently turned their backs on God but when they heard the message they responded, they repented, they turned around and to the horror of the scribes and Pharisees they flocked into the Kingdom.

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

They may have lived in rebellion against God before and just as the son in the parable would have been a pain and embarrassment to his father, rudely rejecting him and refusing to follow him, they would have thumbed their nose at God, but when John the Baptist came calling for a change of heart, they heard him and when Jesus invites them to come with such warmth they turned from their disobedience and willingly gave their heart and life to God.

The scribes and Pharisees however seeing this change in them, instead of taking the message to their own hearts were simply indignant. They saw no need for **them** to come to the Father like this. Jesus uses the continuous tense to hammer home the point saying; *“look even now they are entering while you are holding back”*. ³²***John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.***

It's human nature to think that we know better than God how to live our lives forgetting that he is a Heavenly Father who has only our best at heart. Both of the sons in the parable forgot that but one of them for his tough exterior remembered how the father loved him and responded. It must have seemed hard at the time, difficult to see how working for the father was in his best interest and yet in loving obedience he came and those who had been rebellious and wild, who recognised their sin and responded found his arms open and his way good. How could the scribes and Pharisees hold back. How could they not rejoice to see new lives, ransomed, healed, restored forgiven.

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