

Selected Parables in Matthew's Gospel

The Parable of the Two Sons

Passages: Philippians 2:1–13

Matthew 21:23–32

My wife and I went to the movies last night. I've been reading the book, 'The Help', and thought it would be great to see how good the movie adaptation might be. Let me tell you—It's was terrific!

Now, what makes any book or film good is conflict. There needs to be conflict or tension to keep the viewer in suspense, always wondering how the conflict will be resolved. In this book and movie, set in the early 1960's in the southern state of Mississippi in the USA, the tension is found on several levels. There is the conflict between the rich, white landowner and their poor black 'house help'. But there is also a generational conflict where the young whites are challenging the racism of their parents. Indeed, it's in the days Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, where the entire nation is challenging the south's official policies of racial segregation. As I said, there is conflict on several layers.

(Let me show you the official trailer of the film to give you an idea.)

Today, we look at the parable of the two sons. Although the parable is not exactly a mini-version of the film, I think you will see that there are some important similarities that we must not miss.

Let's pray.

At face value, the parable of the two sons is quite easy to understand. Indeed, all the clues to understanding the parable are there in the passage:

‘The Father’ in the parable is obviously God. He is the owner of a ‘Vineyard’. Not only is this an ancient metaphor for the land of Israel, but a vineyard is also an ancient symbol of fruitfulness, fertility and life. It’s the Garden of Eden! As the owner of the vineyard, therefore, the Father possesses all that we need to live the abundant life. Furthermore, he commends his sons to enter into His vineyard in order to labour with Him and reap this harvest of life. “Come into My vineyard and live!”

Who are the Father’s **two Sons**? Well, in one sense, we can understand them as general representatives of the entire human race. After all, God wants all His creatures to go and work in His vineyard. He wants every human being to enter into, and experience, life in its fullness. He also wants us to engage in cultivating the vines and multiplying the fruit of abundant life throughout the world! In these two sons, therefore, we see the 2 different ways that humanity has reacted to God’s gracious offer of life.

But, of course, the context of this parable in Matthew 21 tells us that Jesus also told this parable with **two particular groups of Jewish people in mind.**

- The first son clearly represents those Israelites who had lost their way: the publicans, tax collectors and prostitutes. If you’ll remember, these are the types of people with whom Jesus spends a great deal of his time, hoping to bring them back into His Father’s Vineyard where they might experience life once again.
- The second son in the parable represents the Pharisees. These are the self-righteous leaders who ran the Temple and maintained a meticulously manicured piety that would have impressed every Jew. On the outside, this group looked as if they were the obedient son of the Father...quite unlike the first son....the outwardly rebellious son.

But the fact is, **both sons are rebellious!**

Of course, the first son looks more rebellious! He is incredibly rude; he openly says ‘No’ to the Father (which, in an Eastern culture like this one, is almost unheard of, even today!) This wayward son, by refusing to work in his father’s vineyard, has obviously chosen the path of death, not life. He is on the road to self-destruction.

What about the second son? He, too, is rebellious—it’s just that he’s far better at playing the game! No one can see his rebellion, but it’s there. Sure, outwardly, he says everything that the father wants to hear. Outwardly, the whole family thinks well of him since he’s such a polite son. He always says ‘yes’ to the Father. That is, he talks the talk. He knows all the religious jargon. From an outsider’s perspective, it looks like he truly desires the life and fruitfulness of the Father’s Vineyard. But in the end, he doesn’t practice what he preaches! He never enters the Vineyard—he never enters into its abundant life!! By staying outside, he is just as rebellious as the first son!

As the Bible says, “There is no one righteous, no not one!”

But there’s a twist to the whole story. You see, for some strange reason, the first son suddenly changes his mind. He gets a revelation of what life is meant to be like, and so he decides to enter into the vineyard and work. That is, he starts to engage in the cultivation of real life. This outwardly rebellious son (representing the prostitutes and tax collectors) has come to his senses and taken his place in the vineyard, alongside His father.

The point of Jesus’ parable is simple. Jesus is saying, “**Don’t be like the Pharisees! They say one thing and do another!**”

Outward religion is not at all what God desires. You can put on a show and fool all the people; you can tell everyone about how God rules your life and directs your paths; you can have an outward form of piety that impresses everyone around you. But, in the end, the only person you’re fooling is yourself! That’s because religious behaviour... behaviour focused on ritual and

churchmanship... blinds you to the essence of what God desires from you. Religious showmanship keeps you out of the Vineyard.

The OT prophet Micah once said the same thing to the Israelites of his day.

Mic 6:6-8 "With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Clearly, according to the prophet, Micah, to enter into the Father's Vineyard involves doing acts of justice, mercy and humility! These are the **acts of life and life-giving**. They focus on the well-being of others. They focus on selfless acts of kindness. They focus on being other-person-centred. This is what it means to be a true son of God, working alongside the Father in His Vineyard.

Now, of course, only Jesus was able to live up to this definition. That's why He alone is called The Son of God. He alone is the Father's True Son. And yet, the fact is that those who listened to Him and followed Him, He gradually instilled in them these same qualities. If you listen to Jesus and accept Him into your life, He will transform the way you live in this world! This is why the first son mentioned in the parable (representing the prostitutes and tax collectors) suddenly changed his mind and decided to enter the Vineyard! **They had been with Jesus!** They had started to listen to Him and follow Him. Gradually, they were allowing His justice and mercy and humility to touch them...and rub off on them. In other words, the True Son of God was turning them into 'children of God'. The more they allowed Jesus to befriend them... the more they ate with Him and had fellowship with Him... the more they saw the value of repenting and going to work in the Father's Vineyard.

At the start of the sermon, I mentioned the book/movie 'the Help'. Just like today's parable, it is based around two groups of people in conflict.

- One group is like the Pharisees. These are the women of society, known by their rigid religiosity, holier-than-thou attitudes, and hardened hearts. They go to church every Sunday and say they are God's children. They even quote the Bible. But by their actions they prove the exact opposite of what they say. (Jesus said, "**By their fruit you will know them!**") They show little by way of justice, mercy and humility, and instead, they take advantage of the societal rules of slavery for their own benefit.
- But, there is a second group of people in the book/movie who, although they are a mixed group of blacks and whites, from both the low and elite classes, they suddenly come alive to the possibility of living life in a totally new way. In other words, they repent! They decide to enter into the Vineyard of equal relationships between blacks and whites. Suddenly, they are fired up with the light of God's truth and the value of all of God's humanity, and they are willing to enter the Vineyard and get to work to cultivate the good fruit of God's righteousness in this world.

Jesus' fingerprints are all over this movie! And while the hyper-religious, Pharisee-types keep getting farther and farther away from the very God they so boastfully say they honour, this counter movement discovers the presence of God in the call of Jesus to justice, mercy and humility.

In the end, both the parable and 'the Help' point to the same the lesson-- **The true call to follow Jesus is not about words but about deeds! It's the call to enter fully into life!...into the work of His Father's vineyard...**as we engage with Jesus and reflect His justice, mercy and humility into all the world.

This is the focus of Philippians 2. In this passage, Paul describes the work of the vineyard that we're called to enter into.

Phil 2:3-11 "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, 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. Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

I consider this church as one small part of God's vineyard. Here, there is no place for the Pharisee-ism of religious ritual or showmanship. Here, only one thing guides us forward—namely, the true Son of God, Jesus Christ, who brings us into His Father's Vineyard and shows us a new way of life—**"To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."**

Let's pray.