

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’²⁹ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ ‘Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.³¹ ‘Which of the two did what his father wanted?’ ‘The first,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.³² For 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. (Matthew 21:28-32)

Do You Walk the Walk?

You’re familiar with the expression, “You talk the talk, but do you walk the walk?” What does it mean? Anybody can talk big. But do you actually do what you’re saying? We all know people who don’t in many areas of our lives. You could have a boss that talks all the time about taking care of his or her employees, but do they really come through when there’s a problem? Do they walk the walk or just talk the talk? You could ask that question about teachers or police officers or parents. Sad to say, we live in a world that’s full of hypocrisy. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus used a parable to ask us that question about our spiritual lives. Because our faith touches all that we are, that question then applies to all that we say and do. But it begins with our faith. My friends, **do you walk the walk?**

Jesus told his parable on Monday of Holy Week – just days before he died. That Monday was a day of confrontation. His enemies challenged him again and again. So Jesus asked them about John the Baptist. Was his message from God or from men? The chief priests and the elders of the people, the spiritual leaders of Israel, refused to answer because they didn’t believe John’s message, but they knew the people did. So they took the easy way and said, “We don’t know.” So Jesus told this parable. A man had two sons. He asked one to go out and work in his vineyard. But the son said, “I will not.” Notice how short the answer was. No explanation. None of the respect that Jewish culture demanded that even an adult son show his father. Just a flat out refusal. It comes off as rude. But later, the son changed his mind and went and worked, just like his father asked him to. The father went to his other son and asked him to go and work in the vineyard. Right away, the second son piped up and said, “I will, sir!” Notice how much more respectful his answer was. But that son never showed up.

Then Jesus asked a simple question: which son did what his father commanded? Of course, the answer was the first one. What made the difference? Jesus said, **“He changed his mind.”** That doesn’t really catch the meaning of the Greek word Jesus used here. It’s the same word that Matthew used a few chapters later to describe how Judas felt after he betrayed Jesus. There, our Bible translation says he was “seized with remorse.” This son who was downright rude to his father repented. He was sorry for the way he spoke and for his refusal to do what his father asked. To show that repentance, he got up and did the work his father had asked him to do.

That change is what this parable is really about. Jesus was talking to the chief priests and the elders of the people of God. He told them that they were not walking the walk. John the Baptist had come, proclaiming “the way of righteousness.” But these spiritual leaders didn’t listen to him. They were like that son who acted like he was going to do what his father commanded, who made a point of calling him “sir” and treating him with the respect, but who didn’t actually do what he commanded. They didn’t do what God commands. But people that they looked down on as horrible sinners, the prostitutes and the tax collectors, they did do what God commanded. They were like the first son.

John’s message was simple, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He called the people of his day to examine their lives and to confess their sins. Then he baptized them to forgive those sins and taught them to live as children of God. The religious leaders of Israel didn’t figure that someone like John had anything to teach them. They were the experts. They knew the Old Testament law. They made sure that other people obeyed that law. Now, they did go through the motions pretty well. They gave a tenth of even the spices in their gardens to church. They were generous in the offerings they brought. They dedicated enormous

amounts of time to reading and discussing the Old Testament scriptures and to the working in the synagogue. So why wasn't God pleased?

Because they did not examine themselves. So they did not receive Christ when he came. John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" But the spiritual leaders of God's people rejected that Savior. He wasn't what they wanted him to be. So in reality they were unbelievers, in spite of all the time and money and effort they put into their public displays of religion. Even our best works are worthless, if they don't come from faith in Christ. And Jesus makes clear in other places that these men were hypocrites. They made long public prayers, but then they threw widows out of their homes when they got behind on their mortgages. They had no mercy on the poor. Worse, they had no spiritual mercy. They made rule after rule for their people to follow, but they never stopped to help or encourage God's people. They did not attend to their spiritual needs. They were self important and certain that God had to accept dedicated people like them into heaven.

But the tax collectors and the prostitutes were different. Now, Jesus was not defending their sinful lifestyles. But when the sinners of Jewish society heard John preach, they repented. They confessed their sins and received baptism to know that they were forgiven. When John pointed to Jesus, they believed him. And they changed their lives. They were the first son, the one who regretted his actions and went and did what his father commanded.

What does all this have to do with us? Clearly, we are not like the spiritual leaders of Israel in at least one sense: we have not rejected Jesus. We've all confessed our faith in him – we talk the talk. But do we walk the walk? Does our faith change our lives? True faith always does. Few of us are "open sinners," but are we guilty of hypocrisy? Do we come here on Sundays and put in our hour a week and then live the rest of the week like we didn't know a thing about Christ? Do we make sure that we don't swear in front of the pastor, but curse and swear all week long? Did we stand up here on the day of our confirmation or on the day we were received into membership and promise to regularly hear the word, but since then we've been coming less and less? Do we walk the walk?

Do we make a show of our faith? When I was a child, we had a neighbor who was very involved in her church. She was always talking about God and she used to make my mother feel guilty because she wasn't a good as this woman presented herself to be. But that lady could be pretty nasty behind people's backs. Do we put on a good show, even making others feel guilty because they're not as church going as we are, but then we indulge our secret sins? Do we gossip? Do we judge? Do we engage in sins that we would be embarrassed to have the world learn about? Do we walk the walk?

Do we follow most of what God says and sincerely try to live as Christians, but we have this one area where we know it's not really what the church says, but we figure we have a right to be happy? Do we have an area of sin where we think we have a good excuse? Luther once said that if we're faithful in everything except at the one point the devil is attacking, we haven't been faithful at all. Do we walk the walk?

When we hear all this talk about hypocrisy, does it remind us of someone we know? Do we wish they could be here to hear this sermon? It's amazing how easy it is for us to point to someone else. But you didn't come this morning to hear how bad other people are and how good you are. All these questions are about you. They're about me. The way of righteousness that John the Baptist preached begins when I take a good, hard look at myself and admit that I am a sinner. That's what the spiritual leaders of Jesus' day were unwilling to do. They hated Jesus because he forced them to do that. Are we willing to take a good, hard look at ourselves? Do we walk the walk?

Isn't it true that every one of us has to admit that in so many ways, we're like that second son? It's easy to say that we'll live our faith. But we fall short over and over again. We all have to admit, don't we, that so often, we haven't done the work God calls us to do – we haven't lived in love for him and for each other? We are all sinners. Jesus told those false spiritual leaders that the prostitutes and tax collectors were getting into heaven ahead of them because they didn't live the way God called them to. In fact, Jesus said that when they saw those sinners repent, still they did not repent and believe in him. He was telling them that if they didn't repent, they weren't going to get to heaven at all. When we have to admit our own hypocrisy, we have to admit that we deserve to be lumped together with hypocrites like them, on the road to hell.

That admission is the beginning of what John the Baptist was preaching. But it isn't the ending. The difference between Christianity and a self-help group or a twelve step program is what we do with that

admission. We bring it to Christ for forgiveness. We ask him for mercy and we trust what John was saying when he declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You and I are part of the world. Jesus takes our sin away. All that guilt, all that sin, all the hypocrisy that we struggle with while we live here with sinful natures and sinful hearts, all the secret sins that betray us, all the failures to follow him and do what he commands – God transferred all that to Jesus. That’s the miracle of the cross. God punished him and he counted that as our punishment. Jesus died. Jesus suffered hell itself on the cross before he died. Jesus paid for all that we are guilty of. Then he rose. In that resurrection God says that we are free, that the Lamb of God has taken our sin away. It’s done. It’s over. Our sin is gone.

What do we have in its place? Nothing other than the very life of Christ. Jesus who alone lived without hypocrisy, Jesus who alone followed the way of righteousness, Jesus the only perfect Christian that ever lived stands in our place. When God looks at us now, he sees Jesus instead. So he doesn’t see our hypocrisy and failure. He sees perfection. He sees dedication. He sees us walking the walk as well as talking the talk. He sees us loving God and loving each other because that’s what our Savior did.

Now, Jesus calls us to live the way that God sees us. He calls us to face our own hypocrisy. We don’t need to point at other’s people’s hypocrisy to hide our own anymore. Because we are loved and forgiven, we can admit our own failures and turn from them. We can fight our own secret sins. We can wage war against our pride and our sinful desires. We can oppose gossip and lack of love. And we can do that not just on Sunday, but every day of our lives. Why? Because Christ lives in us. Because the Holy Spirit is working through the message of our forgiveness. Because our Father in heaven loves us and has made us new in the gospel. Now we have a living, breathing believer inside us. That new man is no hypocrite. He lives to love God. That’s what God has made in you.

Now, until we see Christ face to face, we will always have that old man inside us, that sinner who hates God. He’s the source of our weakness and our hypocrisy. But the gospel is power for the new man. We can’t be perfect here. But we can be faithful. We can follow our Lord day after day. And we can come to him each night with all our failures and lay all our hypocrisies and all our lack of love at Jesus’ feet and know that his blood has washed it all away. And we wake up every morning to a new day of grace. No matter how far short we fell yesterday, Jesus has already erased all that sin. He is here with his forgiveness to comfort us and with his power to strengthen us so that we can follow him today. And he will be here tomorrow and the next day and every day after that until he brings us home to live with him and with no sin or failure or hypocrisy ever again. My friends, by his power and his love, talk the talk and walk the walk of faith. Amen.