

28 “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, “Truly I tell you, 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.

The Perfect Son

You can pick your friends but you can't pick your family - or so the saying goes from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. You can't pick your family but, what if you could? What characteristics would you want? A brother may wish his sister weren't so annoying or needy. A father may want a son who is respectful, hardworking, and successful. A mother might want her children to clean up and be quiet. If anything you just want them happy, healthy, and with a strong faith. The reality however is that you can't pick your family much less who is in or who is out.

Jesus understands and asks a similar question of the religious leaders, “Which child would you like as a son? Which one did the will of the father?” As with all of Jesus' parables there is a loop. Jesus give them just enough rope to hang themselves, just enough rope for them to describe which child they are.

The reality remains, “You can't pick your family.” You can't force someone to be your version of the perfect child. But you can change. Which child are you? Jesus points out **the perfect son**. He points out that there are only two kinds of people in this world. The one who does the will of the Father and those that don't. The perfect son does the will of the Father.

The leaders were not doing the Father's will. The context of our parable is Holy Week. Jesus rode into Jerusalem, overturned tables and drove out the money changers. The next day Jesus returns to the temple and begins to teach. And the most powerful leaders in Jerusalem begin a series of challenges. They take aim at Jesus' authority in order

to drive him from the temple. If Jesus were to lose he would be shamed, removed, and order restored. So they ask, *“By whose authority are you doing these things?”*

Jesus is willing to tell them. He’s raised the dead. He’s healed the sick. He’s demonstrated to them without a doubt that he is doing things only God can do. But they aren’t willing to listen so he responds with a question of his own, *“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”* They plead the fifth, admit ignorance, *“We don’t know.”* Jesus won’t let them off so easy. He starts off slow and lobs them something easy.

A father called his sons to work in the vineyard. The harvest is approaching and there is work to do. The father expects them to do what he’s asked, to show their appreciation for the one who clothed, fed, and housed them. He expects them to contribute to the family business. This is their bread and butter. This is beneficial not only to the father but to the children as well. One says, *“Absolutely not.”* The other says, *“Yes, sir.”* Which son would you rather have? *Which son did the will of the Father?* The leaders respond, *“The first son.”* Jesus then went on to identify them with the second son. The one who said, *“Yes, sir,”* but didn’t go. Jesus says of them, *“These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me”* (Matthew 15:8). They did not listen to John when he came preaching the Word of God instead notorious sinners did.

Which child are you? The child that does the will of the father? What is the father’s will? God expects us to visit the sick, care for the poor, defend the sanctity of life, and speak of Jesus in our words and actions. Actions typically speak louder than words but sometimes words are just as loud like that second son who enthusiastically makes promise but never lifts a finger to do anything. The heart may be there but they just don’t follow through. Or maybe like the religious leaders they’re just paying lip service and have no intention of work. So are we to be more like the first son and lower our expectations of the Father’s will?

Then you realize that this is not a parable about how we are to live but how we do live. The sad fact is that we are such task oriented people and we just might agree with the religious leaders that the one who did the will of the Father is the one who said, *“Absolutely not,”* and later went out into the field and worked. But **Jesus didn’t ask**, *“Which one got the work done?”* rather, *“Which one did the will of the father?”* But someone might argue, *“He repented!”* but the word used for, *“Changed his mind,”* does not mean repent. This is the same word used to describe Judas’ change of heart. This son isn’t sorry for what he’s done. He still doesn’t want to go and work in the vineyard. But he grudgingly

goes, quite possibly cursing his father under his breath. His heart isn't in it. He dishonors his father. In a culture of shame and honor this is outrageous.

In fact Moses wrote, *"If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother... they shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his home town. And they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death"* (Deuteronomy. 21:18-21). This was so serious that God even saw fit to include honoring parents in the top Ten Commandments and here you see why you'll have a long life on earth if you do.

Which son would you rather have? The one who curses you to your face or behind your back? Our hearts cry out, "But at least he did something. At least he actually gets work done." This son is no better. His motives are messed up. Like a volunteer swearing through work they have to do because no one else will do it.

Not only does God expect his children to put their money where their mouth is but to also have their heart there as well. While we admit, *"God loves a cheerful giver,"* (2 Corinthians 9:7) we also admit we're not always cheerful. Sometimes we say, "Yes, sir," with good intentions only to make bad decisions. At other times we give a, "No," and later hide our motives. Jesus doesn't want us to be like the son who actually gets the work done. Which son are you? I hope you recognize that at times we are a lot like both sons.

Neither obeyed the father. Neither have done the Father's will. Jesus wants us to see no way out except through him. God's will isn't about what we do. It's that we believe the one he sent, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the savior from sin.

That's the heart of the matter that Jesus was trying to get through to the religious leaders. They weren't believing. So he asks the a question they can't answer. If they say, "John's baptism was from God." That would mean they need to believe John's message. John's message concerning Jesus, *"Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."* (John 1:29).

Jesus shows us what it means to be a child of God. His words and actions were in perfect order. He loved everyone . He reached out to tax collectors, sinners, and even the religious leaders. Jesus refers to the sons in the parable with the affectionate term of child. He reaches out to those many would consider a waste of time even the religious leaders who would plot against him and crucify him three days later. Jesus then demonstrates the love and obedience to his father's will **by freely and gladly giving up his life on the cross in order to make children of God by faith. This is the Perfect Son.**

The religious leaders think they're okay on their own. But the only standard of holiness they live up to is their own. The religious leaders don't believe but the tax collectors and sinners do. They repent. They are entering heaven ahead of them. They don't have anything they can claim for their own good. They don't have any authority of their own. They were not good people but they have a perfect savior. The perfect son who stood in their place.

We too have the same savior. Who saves enthusiastic as well as the rebellious children. In believing that Jesus is our Savior - we do the will of God and good works naturally flow. Jesus is the motivation and example for living repentant and obedient lives. When in our weakness we make enthusiastic promises we can't keep, pay lip service to him, or even tell him off we can go back to the perfect son who takes away the sin of the world. You're part of the world for whom Christ died. There is no denying it. It's an accomplished fact.

Jesus has made you Children of God. Through the Holy Spirit working in Word and Sacrament he gives you a new heart and a new life so that you want to do the father's will, to do what he has asked with glad and happy hearts. Most importantly through word and sacrament he offers forgiveness for our sin, for dishonoring our father, and even disappointing him.

God's will is for us to say, "Yes, I will go." and then for us to gladly go and do. And that is only possible for us because Jesus, the perfect son was perfectly obedient to his father's will. No, there is nothing for you to do. Repent and believe the promise. Don't try to be the first son or the second son but remember Jesus the perfect son.

Don't lower expectations. Then realize you can't pick your family but God can. Sometimes you'll gladly volunteer only to forget, at other times you might grudgingly go about God's Work. You might wish others weren't so annoying. You can't pick your family. They're still family whether you acknowledge them or not and it makes you look silly when you don't. No, You can't pick your family but God has picked you as family based not on your work, but on the words and actions of the only perfect son. Amen.