

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

Matthew 21:28-32

Verses 28-31a

**“What do you think? A man had two children. He approached the first and said, ‘Today, go and work in the vineyard.’ He answered, ‘Yes sir’ but he did not go there. When he went to the second [child], he said the same thing. [The second child] replied, ‘I do not want to’ but later had a change of mine and went. Of the two, who did the will of the father?” They said, “the latter one.”**”

The context of this parable is the conflict and challenge coming from the legal experts and chief priests (14). They are of high position and represent the elite class, the nobles, the Sadducees and many of the leading Pharisees who were jealous of Jesus and were ready to have him killed.

In the parable are **two children**, not two sons as most translations state. Its construction is very simple and basic. Though not an allegory, it is clear that **the man** represents God and the two children two groups who respond to Jesus in different ways. It is a parable describing in a simple way a person who asks his children to help in the vineyard. **The vineyard** was deliberately chosen because Israel was referred to as God’s choice vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) yet it did not produce the grapes of faith and justice. The father’s request, **today, go and work in the vineyard** can be seen as the call of the gospel, which occurs today and should not be put off.

The first child **answered, ‘Yes sir’ but he did not go there**. The text is somewhat corrupted and other ancient versions have attempted to rectify the problem. Verse 31 fits the version used as our text. The second child did the opposite of the first, flatly refusing but later **changing his mind**. Repentance isn’t the word used here but certainly is what the parable is calling for. This will be come evident in verse 32.

Jesus asked his opponents to consider **who did the will of the father**. The parable is about two groups, one that agrees to fulfill the father’s wishes but later refuses to do so and the second about a group who initially go their own way but later on decide to heed the call to enter the vineyard and get to work. One appears to be compliant and the other appears to be rebellious. Appearance is one of the issues Jesus raised and challenged his hearer’s to reconsider their judgemental and hateful ways based on appearances (7:21; Lk 6:46).

Verse 31b,32

**Jesus said to them, “I am telling you the truth that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going ahead of you into the kingdom of God. For John came to you [revealing] the way of righteousness and you did not believe him but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him. When you saw this, you did not later change your mind so that you believed him.**

Jesus used the very solemn ‘amen’, **I am telling the truth**, to introduce the indictment of the parable against the elite accusers. Their condemnation was made certain by their actions. **The prostitutes and tax-collectors** are the second child, the second group that appeared to be the ungodly ones but have repented of their ways and embraced the invitation to freely enter into the kingdom of God (Lk 3:12; 7:36-47; 18:14; Jn 8:11). Their repentance is an indictment of the ruling and the spiritual elite. This group continually sneered and snubbed them as unclean, people who could defile them yet Jesus was indicating God’s verdict: **they are going ahead of you into the kingdom of God**. Ignoring the teaching here that the kingdom is not the political and visible reality the Jewish people considered it to be, Jesus was providing a wonderful promise to his listeners that those who heed his message and believed it, are already (the present tense is used) in the kingdom of God ahead of the others.

Interestingly, Jesus did not mention his own proclamation here and the acknowledgement of the crowds (15) but only speaks of John's ministry. He did this, probably because he had demanded earlier that his accusers answer about the origin of John's baptism (26). There may be a number of reasons for putting John ahead of himself. John's ministry was in Judea and the chief priests and other elites had ample opportunity to respond to it and so were without excuse whereas Jesus' ministry was mostly in Galilee. John had pointed toward Jesus' coming (3:11,14); mentioning him implied the coming Messiah. We cannot overlook, too, that Jesus was not about to give himself up so easily for these men by making direct claims about himself in their hearing.

John's actions and preaching, **revealed the way of righteousness**, or literally, in the way of righteousness. He was preparing the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah. To enter the kingdom and to live righteously were the essentials of Jesus preaching (6:33). The kingdom was God's and his gift to his people, which required faith to receive it. Meeting the new requirements of the kingdom (chs 5-7) comprised the new way of living the gift of the kingdom initiated in believers.

This is what Jesus' meant by the will of the father in the parable. **The tax collectors and the prostitutes believed** in the message and call of John and lived new lives. When the elites **saw this, they did not later change their minds and believe**. The elites judged by appearances and categorised the people they despised as beneath them spiritually. Their seeing was defective and, so, when they looked a second time at how the prostitutes and tax-collectors responded to John, did not examine their own hearts **and change their minds**. They could not get past their view of themselves and thus were unable to embrace thy way God (Jesus) looked at things.

Repentance, or **changing one's mind** μετεμεληθητε required humility and rejection of the foundations on which the elite had built their lives. But it also required faith in the gospel, in the free entry to the kingdom without asserting spiritual superiority. Those who could admit their undeserving position were willing to receive what John was calling them to and what Jesus actually provided.