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The National Presbyterian Church

The Time That it Takes

Matthew 21:28-32

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I'm proud of the American people this week. We saw the greatness of the American election tradition. We saw a long vigorous campaign and then a gracious conclusion once the people spoke. And to see a country come together and to see the loser so gracious and the winner so gracious and wise is just a great tribute to the American democracy.

At the end of the sermon in the mountain, Jesus Christ made an amazing claim. He said those who hear his words in which our Lord claimed to be the fulfillment of the law and do them, are wise. They are building their house on a rock. Those who hear his words and don't do them are foolish. They are building their house on sand. And then he says--when the storms come the one--the house built in rock stands, when the storms come the house built in sand falls. Matthew makes the comment that when the people heard the sermon in the mountain, they were amazed. He did not teach like the rabbis they were used to. He spoke with authority.

But there is a gap between hear and do. I want to talk about that today, the gap. There is a lag time. Our Lord preserves it in the way he ends his sermon in the mountain. "Those who hear my words and do them." So there is a period of time between hearing and doing. He tells a parable on the Monday of Holy Week the day after Palm Sunday when great crowds honored Christ. That honor itself bothered the Pharisees because the crowds sang the

Hallel to Jesus. The *Hallel* psalms 113 to 118 are the most messianic part of the Book of Psalms.

The stones that the builders have rejected has become the chief cornerstone. They said the word “Hosanna, Lord help us.” And the Pharisees said “You should tell your disciples to be quiet, they shouldn’t sing this.” And Jesus said, “If they don’t sing, the very rocks would cry out.” On the Monday after that, Jesus came into the temple area and spoke in the Court of Women which is where he ordinarily taught so that Greeks could listen to him, women could listen to him as well as men, and he told them a parable. Here is the parable as Matthew records it in chapter 21. It’s one of the shortest of the parables of Jesus. “What do you think? A man had two sons and he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” And the son said, “I will not” but afterwards he repented. The word means literally to ‘change around’ or ‘turn around;’ and he went. And then he went to the second son and said the same “Son, go work in the vineyard today” and he answered “I go, Sir.” By the way the word “Sir” is a word for Lord. He didn’t say “Dad.” He said “Sir.” He is treating his father with honor. “I go Lord, Sir.” But he did not go. That’s the end of the parable. This is a very short parable. Sometimes our Lord ends a parable and says nothing after the parable at all. Sometimes, he will interpret the parable; that’s rare. Sometimes he will ask a question of the listeners, they will answer and then he will make a comment. That’s what happened in this parable.

Jesus at the end of the parable says, “Which of the two did the will of the father?” and they answered, “the first.” They got the right answer. And then Jesus spoke to them. This next set of sentences tend to be very salty; and yet--listen closely because there is hope in these sentences. Then Jesus said to them, “Amen I say to you. The tax collectors and the harlots,” (that’s the salty part) “go into the kingdom of God.” Now I have to point out something. When he mentioned vineyard in the parable, every Jewish listener would know that vineyard in the Old Testament refers to the kingdom of God. It refers to God’s people as God’s kingdom people.

In, Isaiah 5, the people of God are described as the vineyard. You saw it in the Psalm 107 that was read today as well. And so they would know that refers to the kingdom of God and to the Jewish people as God’s kingdom

people. In fact, Josephus tells us that one wall facing the temple that Herod had built was carved with a huge grape vine and grapes to symbolize the people of God. So when he said "vineyard" they would think about it; and now he interprets it that way. He says, "I say to you that the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you, for John the Baptist came to you in the way of righteousness." That's our Lord's interpretation of John's ministry. "And you did not believe him." Three times now he's going to repeat the word "believe." You did not trust him, believe him. But the tax collectors and the harlots believed him, trusted him. "And even when you saw it"--is he referring to Palm Sunday? We don't know. "You did not afterward repent and believe him." This is the word of the Lord.

Let's pray. Lord, may the words in my mouth the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Lord teach us from this parable. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Well, this is a parable about lag time for sure between hear and do. It's our Lord himself teaching us about the dynamics of that lag time. Let's take a look at the parable first of all. What makes this short story work as a story? It's a two-story parable: two stories that were told side-by-side. Some of the greatest parables are two stories told side-by-side.

What makes it work as a story is that each boy is flawed. Each boy has a fault. Think of the first boy. The first boy too quickly opposes his father's will as if the father's will was against him. This boy is impudent and defiant. The father says "Okay, we're setting out to work today for the vineyard. Son I'd like you to work in the vineyard." He said "I will not." He is impudent. He is defiant. Later on he changes his mind and does in fact go to the vineyard. But how would I describe this boy? I would say this boy is a big problem at breakfast, but he is a joy at supper, okay? Hold that thought. But at breakfast, this kid upsets the whole family. Do you have anybody in your family like this? Are you like this?

At first glance I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it. And so his mother, who is trying to cook breakfast, is upset. It upsets everyone. He churns the family up. He is a big problem at breakfast. But later on at supper, it's a different story.

The second son (and by the way, in all of the two story parables of our Lord the second part of the story is always more complicated than the first; you'll notice that); the second son enthusiastically says, "Yes" to his father's request. Our Lord implied this by the reverent words "I go, Sir." He didn't have to say "Sir." He didn't have to say "Lord." He could have said "Okay, father I go." But this boy is totally enthusiastic. The father says, "Okay" after the first son. "Alright son, would you go work in the vineyard?"

I know, as a parent of three children in the family, I tend, as a father, to be a little milder as your children come along. And you don't make a request in the same way. Maybe. I don't know. But the father says, "Would you go work in the vineyard? This boy, notice what he says. Perhaps he says, "I'm glad you suggested that, Dad. I was thinking this morning during quiet time I can't wait to go in the vineyard, unlike others in this family." He is maybe a little judgmental. "I know it's the college fund that most of us in the family are working in the vineyard for so I can't wait to go. Thank you, Dad. Mom put on the steak for me 'cause I'm going to get up a real sweat today, I love work." That's one possible interpretation of "I go, Sir."

But for whatever reasons--and notice, our Lord shows no interest in the reasons-- for whatever reasons, he doesn't go. I would describe this boy this way: he is a joy at breakfast and give him credit for that. He did cheer up the family at breakfast. The first boy churned-up the family. The second boy cheered up the family. Everybody, "There my son, what a fine boy. Thank you. What a neat boy--you're an inspiration" at breakfast. It's a different story at supper. He is a big problem at supper and unfortunately for him this is a supper parable not a breakfast parable. Well, what does the parable teach? I want to make three reflections on this parable.

First of all, the parable shows that Jesus Christ really understands human beings. In fact, that could be said of all the parables of our Lord. They are psychologically accurate. Many scholars have noticed this about the parables of Jesus. Jesus shows in this parable that he is aware and expects sharp negative reactions to his kingly claim. When he says, "Those who hear these words of mine and do them are wise" he knows that somebody would say, "Wow, I'm not sure I want to hear your words." Jesus knows that it will stir up negative reactions. Notice, it doesn't bother him in the parable. The negative struggle that this first boy has doesn't seem to offend him. The father is not portrayed as being terribly upset. He just stands it.

So notice that Jesus points out that the father is not fragile. It's very interesting. We don't have a God who is so easily offended that he then turns to rage. No--Jesus shows in this parable that he expects that. Also in the parable he shows that he expects that some people will too quickly and too easily show compliance. Are they being evasive intentionally? Notice that our Lord does not describe or explain. Or did they only half think about their tremendously enthusiastic response? We don't know. But for whatever reason, the second son does not arrive in the vineyard. That's why it's more complicated.

The second son does not go in the vineyard. He may later on. No story is ever finished. Thank God for that. Do you have that kind of person in your family? Are you that kind of person? Is this parable for you one way or the other? Notice that all the parables of our Lord have a way of catching us.

Now, the second reflection I'd like to make is that this parable helps us understand the freedom journey that our Lord preserves between hearing and doing. He preserves it. The parable is clear. There is a period of time between hearing the will of God and doing it. There is a period of time between hearing of your weaknesses, your sins and repenting. Notice, he picks that up. John the Baptist came to you, the harlots and the tax collectors repented, you didn't. There is a period of time between when you hear the truth about yourself and when you actually do something about that truth about yourself. That's the meaning of repentance.

C.S. Lewis reflected on this in *Screwtape Letters*. In reading *Screwtape Letters*, we need to reverse everything because the Screwtape is a senior devil writing to a junior devil therefore when he refers to the Enemy, he means God. When he refers to our father below, he means the devil so keep that in mind. In chapter 13, the patient who Screwtape is concerned about has repented. He was for a while heading toward the father below and gone away from his faith, and then he suddenly swung back and came back to his faith in God. It bothers Screwtape. Screwtape is very upset with Wormwood for being a second-rate tempter in that he failed to hold on to this patient.

So then listen to what he says at the end of the 13th chapter. "It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster. The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance," referring to this

patient. "Let the little brute wallow in it." And here is an inside joke Lewis puts in. "Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it." After all Lewis wrote all these books about the Christian faith. "Let him write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy", that would be God, "plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act on it. No amount of piety in the imagination and affections will harm us," Screwtape says, "if we can keep it out of his will."

"As one of the humans has said," and here Lewis quoting G.K. Chesterton, "Active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will ever be able to act, and in the long run, the less he will be able to feel." There is a gap. There is a lag time between hearing and doing. Hearing and repenting. Hearing and actually making a move in which I put my weight down and trust in God's faithfulness and trust in his truth. Lewis saw that. Our Lord preserves that in this remarkable parable.

Two, there is also a lag time between hearing of God's love and of experiencing personally God's grace, and that great fact is what really the vineyard is all about where we are able to eat the food that is in the vineyard. I've been a pastor for a long time and I know that's true. I meet people all the time that tell me they know in theory about God's love. They know in theory about God's faithfulness, but it's not really a part of their experience. Because there is a lag time. There is a lag time between hearing about God's love and experiencing God's love.

Think of one the most beautiful verses in the New Testament. In the Book of Revelation our Lord speaks to the Laodicean Church "Behold, I stand the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and will sit with him and he with me." It's a tremendous promise of grace. But did you hear the lag time in it. Listen. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears," notice "hears" just like in the end of sermon in the mountain "and opens the door, I will come in".

Notice what our Lord doesn't say in the Book of Revelation, he doesn't say this "Get ready, I'm coming through whether you like it or not". He doesn't do it. He doesn't crash into your life. He doesn't take away your freedom. He doesn't say that. He says "I knock, if you hear my voice and open the door I will come in." There's a lag time. Karl Barth in explaining the theol-

ogy of the Holy Spirit put it this way. He said, "You know that you are assured of the Holy Spirit when you're able to say that God's love is not only a general truth which it is." God's love is a truth and it is a truth whether you feel it or not. It's there whether you know it or not. But Barth then goes on to say "When God's love is not just a general truth but you're able to say, "it's also for me." It's also for me. It's the Holy Spirit who has assured you of that; the Holy Spirit who has closed that gap, so that I know it's also for me. Do you know that? That is the assurance of salvation. That's the assurance of God's love in your life. But there is a lag time between knowing the truth, knowing the love and trusting it.

Now finally, my last reflection. This parable shows that the lag time in the long run favors the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our Lord himself preserves this, so he is not worried about it. He is so sure of himself that he is willing to take time with you. I have often said that to parents. You know the story is not over. The key to parenting is knowing how to stay close and to step back. And sometimes you have to step back in a person's life and let that person have their own journey, and you have to sometimes just pray and try to be a reference point but you can't barge in. You have to let each son, each daughter, and each friend have their own experience of God's truth and grace.

Jesus Christ did it. He set the stage for us because his truth, his faithfulness, his grace wears well into the afternoon. In the afternoon the first son entered the vineyard. I put it this way, it is better to finally believe what at first I could not say than to say at first what I do not believe. We should never encourage people to say things they don't believe. It's better to finally believe what at first I could not say than to say at first what I don't believe. The Christian's faith has integrity written all over it and wears well through this lag time. When I became a Christian--when I was a student at U.C. Berkeley, I later reflected back on that windy place where I become a Christian.

And later I wrote a poem called "Such a Windy Place." I will read it to you.

*Such a windy place
to find the water and food that will
last and give me time while dust
and leaves, ideas and words blow constantly in my face
How can I can pause and think*

*wonder and ask
decide and do
in such a windy place
It takes a Good Shepherd with skill and will
who loves his sheep on a thousand hills
while we pause and think
wonder and ask
decide and do
in such a windy place*

I think our Lord's parable is about that windy place. He is so sure of himself. He is willing to shepherd us through that windy place, so that we can move from hear to do.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you for this parable, for the joy of it, the wonder of it that you're so sure of yourself that the first son and his negative, even impudent response, doesn't bother you. You're able to roll with it because the truth wins out over the long haul. Thank you for that. Your love wins out. May we experience that, each one of us, in our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*. London: G. Bles, 1942.

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*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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