

Once again, the Gospel presents us with a parable about a vineyard. Understand that when Jesus used parables to teach about God, he used themes and examples that were common in his day. In Israel, there were a lot of vineyards. We also have to understand that our Lord's parables do not present factual events. The parables are fiction. Jesus was a master story-teller, and he used these stories, made up on the spot, to drive home important points. In today's story, the vineyard owner had two sons. I'm sure that in the father's mind, these sons represented inexpensive labor. We can put something of a modern spin on the parable's story line, to help us catch the sense of our Lord's approach to story telling, by telling the story this way.

"Go work in the vineyard," Dad said to son number one. "Go take a hike, pop," son one said to his father. "It's too hot and besides, I want to go fishing." But after only a little while, son number one realized that his hasty response likely was not in his best interest, so he went quietly to the vineyard and did his chores.

In the meantime, Dad spoke to son number two. "Go work in the vineyard, kid." "Of course, Dad," said son number two. "Your wish is my command." However, son two doubted that Dad would have time to follow through and check his work, so he went instead to the pond, hoping to join his brother in fishing. After telling this very short story, Jesus asked the Jewish chief priests and elders, "Which one of these did the will of the father?"

What point was Jesus making, and what meaning does this parable have for us today? When our Lord told this parable, and when the Church recorded it in the Gospels, the teaching point was that the Jewish rejection of John the Baptist's call to repentance was nothing less than the intentional disobedience of Almighty God's will. That was not the sort of thing, Jesus said, that the religious leaders of Israel ought to do. After the crucifixion and resurrection, during the early days of the Church, the understanding of the parable shifted, somewhat, to stress Jewish intentional disregard of God's will in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. That shift was an attempt to explain why our Lord's own people rejected him and why Gentiles should nonetheless accept him as Lord. Honestly, this shift in focus was an understandable marketing attempt to evangelize Gentiles. But we need to recognize that at the time Jesus told this story, well before the Church was reaching out to evangelize Gentiles, our Lord's criticism was of Israel's refusal to repent and heed the call of John the Baptist to holiness. It is with this realization and understanding that the parable takes meaning for us today.

In telling the story, Jesus puts the Jewish leaders at a level lower than even tax collectors and prostitutes. That level was about as bad as it got in Jewish society. Let me unpack what our Lord was saying. In our Lord's experience, tax collectors and prostitutes had the good sense to repent and become disciples. The Jewish religious leaders would not repent. Jesus asked how could the likes of Saint Mary Magdalene, in Christian tradition understood to be a prostitute who became a disciple of Jesus, and Saint Matthew, a tax collector and disciple of Jesus, repent and become followers of the Lord, while the Jewish leaders refused to. The answer that Jesus gave is that the Jewish leaders were self-righteous to the extreme. They thought that their understanding of God was perfect. Jesus believed that they were dead wrong. It's hard to respond to a call to repentance and surrender to the will of God when you are convinced that you are already perfect. The Lord's teaching point was that self-righteousness gets in the way and keeps us out of the Kingdom of God. If we manage to get on a self-righteous kick, it is going to be awfully hard for us to hear the voice of the Savior.

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus says to us, in so many words, “Who does the will of God?” Is the answer someone who, at first, rejects what God asks, for whatever reasons, but ultimately has a change of heart and does follow in the footsteps of the Savior? Or, is it someone who commits to godly obedience, but very soon decides that it is too much effort and turns away? The call to discipleship is a call to obedience, obedience marked by both commitment and tenacity. One is not obedient if one does not hang in. A faithful follower continues to follow, regardless of the cost, regardless of the length of service. You have to hang in regardless of how tired and worn out or burned out you become. Discipleship must be a lifetime commitment. Discipleship can never end.

Jesus compared discipleship to labor in the vineyard, the vineyard of God. The vineyard, in the parable, represented the Kingdom of God, the realm of God, and we are all called to be workers in the Kingdom of God. Last Sunday you heard that it doesn't really matter when you first went to vineyard. It doesn't matter how long you've been a disciple. It doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian. God rejoices simply in the fact that you are a Christian. But once you have started, there can be no turning back. If you turn back, it is like you've never even begun. This, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the whole point of the Gospel this morning. To do the will of our Father in Heaven is to go into his vineyard, in the name of Christ, and do a disciple's work. *Amen.*