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Sermon Notes

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To Obey is Better than Promising to Obey

Matthew 21:28-32

Picture yourself moving from a home you've lived in for forty years...

You're elderly now, feeble, unable to care for your home, with all of its incessant needs

You buried your spouse two months ago, and your children are all grown and gone

It's time to move to a smaller, simpler place... and that means packing up

You rummage through drawers and boxes, and something catches your eye... it's a note of encouragement you started to write to a friend who was dying of cancer; the friend died three years ago, and you never finished the note. You'd forgotten that... but now the mere sight of it brings a pang of remorse, like a splinter announcing its presence by a brief stab of pain

You continue to rummage, and you come across a brochure for a missions program designed for retirement aged couples... you and your wife talked seriously about doing it; you prayed about it, you promised yourselves you would do it. But then things got busy, time slipped away and you never did it. Now you're too old to go. Another stab of pain.

Your rummaging fingers pull out a prayer card for a missionary. It's old now, and the missionary has since left the field. It was over twenty years ago. The card was a reminder to pray daily for that missionary couple. You remember the service at which the man spoke, how the Lord spoke to you. He asked people to come forward and kneel at the front of the church if they would commit themselves to pray for him and his wife as they served the Lord in a hostile Muslim country. The service was very moving, you cried and went forward. You received the laminated card. For a while it was on your refrigerator. Then it was on your nightstand. Now it's buried under a pile of bank statements and other flotsam and jetsam of daily life. You realize with some regret that you prayed for him daily for a month or so, weekly for a few more months, monthly for a few months after that, then stopped praying altogether. The missionary was on the field for ten years after you stopped praying.

A pile of papers... pro-life appeals to write to a Congressman for a damaging bill about to be addressed in Congress; information on AIDS orphans in Africa; handouts from a personal evangelism course you took at church...

Suddenly you sit back and look at it all... the evidence of a life of promises **made** to God; promises made and promises broken

Dear friends, this is one of the great dangers of our deceptive hearts: that it is enough to just INTEND to do right... to have a soft heart and make a promise to God... then who cares if you actually see it through?

Well, God cares...

When He sends forth the word, it produces CONVICTION of sin

When conviction occurs, God wants us to REPENT

Repentance is only genuine if we then OBEY what He commands in that matter

Promises, vows, intentions, desires are all good... but not enough if not followed up with actions

This is precisely why God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to enter the world...

All the best intentions of our hearts, our best plans and dreams for how we'll serve the Lord... many of them come to nothing

In the Parable we're studying today, a father has two imperfect sons... one talks a good game, but doesn't back it up; the other one has an attitude problem, but ends up doing the right thing

Jesus clearly puts the priority on obedience over promising to obey

Three different applications:

- 1) A warning to the self-righteous religious person, who thinks that their outwardly compliant, religious lifestyle will compensate for the fact that they really don't obey God in what really matters; they are trusting in their OUTWARD "YES" to God, but there is nothing behind it
- 2) A warning to us who make promises to God when moved by moments of conviction, but who consistently fail to follow through... we make resolutions, we have good intentions, we make promises to ourselves and to God—but we don't DO what we resolved, intended or promised
- 3) An encouragement to all of us: TODAY we can repent, change our minds, and go out into the fields and do the work the Father has commanded us to do; the POWER of GENUINE REPENTANCE to renew our relationship with God

I. The Context of the Parable of the Two Sons

- A. The Final Week of Jesus' Life: Trouble in Jerusalem
- B. Jesus' Enemies Attack: The Question of Authority
- C. Jesus' Counter-Question: The Origin of John's Authority
- D. Jesus' Enemies: Unbelieving, Cowardly, Dishonest
- E. Jesus Tells this Parable
 - 1. Immediate application: chief priests and elders seem outwardly obedient to God
 - a. They say "Yes" to God in an outward and showy way
 - b. Their lifestyles have an aroma of religion, of obedience to the laws of God
 - c. But at their core, these men are really saying NO!!! to God
 - d. We will get a fuller expose of their rebellion in Matthew 23: "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites..."
 - e. Jesus calls them whitewashed tombs... on the outside they appear to men as righteous, but on the inside, full of dead men's bones and everything unclean
 - f. The parable of the two sons exposes a class of religious people that spends their whole lives saying YES to God but going their own way
 - g. They feel that God should be grateful for their seemingly willing responses to everything He commands
 - 2. Deeper issue... the tax collectors and the prostitutes represent people who become convicted of their openly rebellious lives and then repent and go and obey God
 - 3. The parable is really about the NEED for REPENTANCE

II. The Parable Delivered

Matthew 21:28-31 "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.

A. Think About It!

“What do you think?”

1. All of Jesus’ parables are designed to make us think
2. He takes scenes from daily life, little vignettes that teach some central lesson

B. The Lesson

1. The central lesson of this parable: actions speak louder than words
2. True repentance leads to a changed life
3. If there’s no changed life, there’s no repentance
4. Jesus’ enemies were those who outwardly said “Yes!!” to God day after day, but they did not do His will

C. The Basic Facts

1. A father, two sons and a vineyard
2. A simple command

Matthew 21:28 He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

3. The first son: a shocking refusal, followed by later repentance

Matthew 21:29 "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

4. The second son: initial, respectful assent, but no obedience

Matthew 21:30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

D. Jesus’ Key Question

Vs. 31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered.

1. This is a remarkably simple parable with a profoundly important lesson
2. In the movie Jesus of Nazareth, this question was answered by a little boy, about five years old... lisping almost: “The first”
3. Anyone can answer the question... but can anyone absorb the lesson?
4. God desires a life of obedience that comes from a broken, repentant heart

5. A proud heart that thinks it needs no help and certainly has nothing to repent for is worthless in God's sight

III. The Parable Applied... to Them

Matthew 21:31-32 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.

A. A Shocking Assertion by Christ

1. These chief priests and elders spent their full time studying God's commands and seeking to obey even the minutia... the most sanctimonious and outwardly righteous men in Jewish society
2. The tax collectors and prostitutes were the most despicable and despised people in Jewish society
3. Jesus claims here that they were entering the Kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders... ASTOUNDING
4. Tax collectors were probably the most universally despised members of the Jewish nation
 - a. They were collaborators with the occupying Roman Empire
 - b. They obtained tax collecting franchises from the Romans and turned on their own people and squeezed them for tax money
 - c. They had the weight of the Roman Empire and its undefeated legions behind them... if any zealots tried to assassinate the tax collectors, there would be major reprisals... and no one could doubt the brutal power of the Romans
 - d. Even worse, the tax collectors took from their neighbors more tax money than the Roman required... and got filthy rich doing it; they flaunted their wealth over their suffering countrymen
 - e. Even worse, they used these wicked wages to support an immoral lifestyle; splurging on disgusting and sexually immoral feasts
 - f. To a law-abiding Jew, no class of people could have been more spiritually repulsive than a tax collector... no possible hope of salvation for them!!!
5. And what of prostitutes?

- a. As tax collectors were the most immoral of all men, so prostitutes were the most immoral of all women
 - b. There is no need to describe the immorality that they piled on themselves day after day and night after night
 - c. It seemed impossible that such a woman could ever stand holy and blameless in God's sight
6. AND YET... these sinners, these tax collectors and prostitutes were the very ones who listened with broken hearts to John's preaching, who submitted to his command to repent and to bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance

B. The Way of Righteousness... Proclaimed by John and Jesus

1. The Way of Righteousness

- a. Jesus says "John came in the way of righteousness..."
 - i) Living an outwardly righteous life himself
 - ii) Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for sinners to come back to God in the way of righteousness
 - iii) It has to do with LIFESTYLE, actions of obedience
- b. As a matter of fact, the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew asserts to the righteousness of John's Baptism, and of Jesus Himself submitting to it

Matthew 3:13-15 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

- c. John came to live a life of righteousness, and to proclaim a righteous salvation from God... a salvation to be consummated in Christ

2. But the key to John's ministry was this simple proclamation:

Matthew 3:1-2 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

- a. The central concept: all human beings are sinners, and God is a holy King
- b. God has given us commands, and His commands ought to govern our lives
 - i) So in the parable of the two sons, God as fatherly commander stands over the human race... giving us all commands

- ii) The creator of the ends of the earth has the right to give us His commands, to govern us with his laws
- iii) But all of us have broken His commands, violated His laws, rebelled against His Kingdom

3. The is the exact same message that Jesus preached: REPENT

Matthew 4:17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

C. Entering the Kingdom of God... by Repentance

Vs. 31-32 "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.

1. Essential to understanding Jesus' message: every sinner stands on the outside of the Kingdom of Heaven and at some point must enter it
2. The chief priests and elders represent the son who outwardly seems to be saying "Yes" to God, but who refuse to do His will... they DENY the need for repentance... hadn't they said "Yes" to God??
3. The tax collectors and the prostitutes outwardly said NO to God and yet they, convicted by the preaching of John, fled the wrath to come and repented... they entered the Kingdom of God ahead of the righteous people who had no need to repent
4. This should have been EVIDENCE that God was at work in John's ministry and should have caused the chief priests and elders to flee the wrath to come as well

IV. The Parable Applied... to Us

A. No one is Righteous Enough to Enter the Kingdom of God

1. The chief priests and elders felt they were righteous enough
2. They were essentially prideful, trusting in their own righteousness
3. But scripture reveals plainly
4. They outwardly said "Yes, yes" to God, but in their hearts, they disobeyed Him
5. John the Baptist called on them to REPENT for the Kingdom of Heaven was near

6. Jesus called on them to REPENT for the Kingdom of Heaven was near
 7. They DID NOT OBEY those commands, simply because they didn't think they needed to!
 8. This is the greatest problem any sinner can have... to be so deceived, so blind that they think they are righteous enough for heaven without any help at all
- B. True Righteousness is a Gift of God... Achieved by the Life and Death of Christ
1. Let's face it... neither of these two sons is the picture of righteousness
 2. It really just reestablishes what we said a moment ago: there is NO ONE righteous, not even one
 3. Son #1: gives a sassy and disrespectful answer, then later changes his mind and obeys his father
 4. Son #2: gives a respectful answer, but in the end disobeys his father
 5. By asking which of the two, in the end, obeyed the father, Jesus is highlighting the power of repentance and of a transformed life... it's the only hope for sinners, and praise God for it
 6. But one Son did both perfectly: He said YES to God and then DID what the Father wanted perfectly, every time: Jesus Christ
 - a. He said Yes to God, when He entered the world
 - b. He said Yes to God when He obeyed all of God's commands by never sinning
 - c. He said Yes to God in Gethsemane
 - d. Then, in the ultimate act of obedience, He said Yes to God on the cross

Romans 5:19 through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

C. True Repentance is Essential to Entering the Kingdom of God

What is Repentance?

Vs. 28-29 [The father] 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.

1. "Changed his mind" = thought differently about it

2. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus uses a different expression but it amounts to the same thing
 - a. The Prodigal Son had squandered his father's inheritance money on loose living and sin
 - b. A famine came and he was starving; he hired himself to feed pigs, but no one gave him anything

Luke 15:17-19 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!'¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

Repentance is “coming to your senses” about sin and about God... dealing properly with your heart before God

3. Whole life repentance
 - a. Recognizing that I am a sinner, in need of comprehensive forgiveness from God
 - b. Nothing I do can EVER merit my forgiveness or my proper standing before God
 - c. I am deeply stained, deserving condemnation, with no hope of cleansing apart from God's mercy

Luke 18:13 the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

4. A whole life of repentance
 - a. True repentance is not just something we do at the beginning of the Christian life
 - b. At every moment, our Father's commands stand over us and dictate our lives
 - c. He is constantly telling us to get up and go work in His vineyard
 - d. He desires a full life of obedience
 - e. The longer we go on the Christian life, the more we see the need to repent again and again for our disobedience

D. The Elements of True Repentance: Thomas Watson

1. Sight of Sin
2. Sorrow for Sin
3. Confession of Sin
4. Shame for Sin
5. Hatred of Sin
6. Turning from Sin

E. True Repentance Always Results in an Obedient Life

1. To say “I have repented” but to live the same way proves the repentance was counterfeit
2. John the Baptist:

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

- a. One of the greatest delights of the Christian life is that, at every moment, the Father is glad to receive us back to Himself through repentance

Michael Card: “He hands us each new moment saying, ‘My child begin again... you’re free to start again!’”

So, if you have broken promises to God: perhaps you promised to give some money to a Christian work, or pray for a missionary, or witness to a co-worker, or memorize a book of the Bible, or fast for a full day, or begin a new pro-life ministry at church... you made a promise, but until now you’ve not fulfilled it... **YOU’RE FREE TO REPENT** and keep the promise!!!

F. God will Assess Our Hearts by our Lives: Not those who SAY but those who DO

1. God has an active lifetime of good works for us to do in His vineyard
2. The righteous life is a vigorous life, not a lazy, self-indulgent life
3. Many make lavish promises of obedience to God, writing Him IOUs and not paying up
4. Many times, people rest on their “good intentions”... “I meant well” “I intended to give money to the poor, I wanted to go faithfully to church, I planned on turning over a new leaf and stopping my drinking, I was hoping at some time to become a kinder, more loving person”

5. John Bunyan, author of the classic *Pilgrim's Progress* wrote another classic, "A Few Sighs from Hell", based on the Rich Man and Lazarus... he described hell as a place of bitter regrets, as the damned think of how they wasted their opportunities on earth; one thought I think may dominate some minds: "I always thought I'd have more time! I never expected to go so soon! I intended to believe in Christ... I intended to change my ways, follow Christ, go to church, read the Bible, pray, serve the Lord... I really meant to, I really intended to... I just never did. I always thought I'd have more time!"
6. The consistent pattern of Scripture: we will be assessed by our WORKS... by what we actually DID, not by what we INTENDED to do, or PROMISED to do, or THOUGHT we would do eventually

Romans 2:6-10 God "will give to each person according to what he has done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Revelation 20:12-13 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.

John 5:28-29 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

7. BIG ISSUE: "Not those who say but those who do": Many are "fine talkers" of religion... talking the Christian life, but living differently

Matthew 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

1 John 3:18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

James 2:14-17 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep

*warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?
¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

8. I as a preacher need to be especially careful that my LIFE corresponds to my SPEECH

9. Someone whose life does not match up to their speech is a hypocrite... and Judgment Day will strip away all hypocrisy

G. What areas are you promising more than you are doing?

1. When you make promises to the Lord, keep them by His grace and power!

Ecclesiastes 5:4-7 When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵ It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ ¶ Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

2. If you are aware of some promises you've made and have not yet kept, repent, ask God to forgive you, then do them

H. The Key Vineyard: Evangelism and Missions

Matthew 9:36-38 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Proverbs 10:5 He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.

God the Father is urging us, his sons, to go and work in his vineyard... he wants us to be faithful to serve Him in leading lost people to Christ

Final word: are we open to leading some of the hardest people to Christ?

Matthew 21:32 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 chief priests and elders of the people sneered at the crowd as a mob who knew nothing of the law... tax collectors and prostitutes repenting at the preaching of John the Baptist or Jesus meant NOTHING to them... but it means everything to God:

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.

I want FBC Durham to be actively involved in leading outcastes and unchurched people to Christ

Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle... a church that baptized 400 people this past Easter Sunday... most of those people were as far from “church culture” as you can possibly imagine!!

Biker dudes with purple Mohawks reading Puritans and talking about the mortification of the flesh!

What an incredible work that is...

We are called to this area, and that means being willing to make sacrifices to see unchurched people come to faith

I worry that many of us may be uncomfortable with being intimately involved with lost people because their lives are messy

MAY IT NEVER BE!!