

# WORKING IN THE VINEYARD

Dr. Fred Fourie ~ Sunday, July 15, 2007

Let us read an ancient story, told in the Gospel of Matthew. It was a normal day in the temple for those days. Lots of talking; lots of arguments without much of real value being done. Jesus came in and started teaching the people. The Church leaders felt threatened by his presence and wanted to silence him. Just listen how Jesus changed the argument into a challenge – and how he challenged them – and us – to stop talking and start doing something of real value:



**MATTHEW 21:23-32** When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not

go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

A certain engineer received a phone call from his crew of road workers who drove out to the country to fix a road. They got to the jobsite and then "remembered" that they had left their shovels back in town. "I will send the shovels out right away," said the frustrated engineer. "Meanwhile, just lean on each other!"

In this parable however, Jesus was not talking about lazy workers. He was actually saying to the Church leaders of his time, "you are talking the talk. but you are not walking the walk!"

In this delightful story told by Jesus, one boy pretended that he was going to do the work that his father wanted him to - the other yelled that he wasn't going to do a thing, but eventually came around and did what his Dad wanted him to do.

The chief priests and the elders in Jesus' time had endless arguments and tricky questions, hoping that Jesus would say something that they could use against him. They were hopelessly stuck in their own ways! God's way was no longer their way!

Jesus was calling them away from their ancient rituals and ceremonies. Obviously, Jesus knew that their hearts did not burn like their offertory flames. So he refused to join in the argument and told them the story of the workers in the vineyard instead.

It was the story of a son who promised his father to work in his vineyard and never got around to it, while the other, who was not really planning on it, changed his mind and got the job done! The message is clear: **Somehow they will have to stop talking and begin doing something.**

The vineyard that needed care in the story of Jesus is nothing but -- the **Kingdom of God** --- which calls for people to come forward and work and serve and be part of the great harvest. If a world was to be conquered ~ and meaningful change was to come about ~ if lives were to be changed ~ action was needed.

The message to the ancient church leaders was urgent and direct. **But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** Jesus was challenging the Church leaders of his time! They originally promised God that they would do God's work. In reality they were not doing it – they were caught up in senseless and useless rituals and arguments.

Jesus then conjured up the image of those who originally said NO when they were called – the prostitutes and tax collectors – who were now changing their mind, obeying the call, and turning to God – following Jesus to work in God's vineyard. Former sinners were now doing God's will while the Church of his time was blind to notice – **that God's Kingdom would come – even without them.**

Was this story true THEN but not NOW? Or does this story that Jesus told have the power to move you and me --- so that our lives will never be the same again?

Only God - only God - only God can take an **almost lost cause** and breathe on it with his **Holy Spirit** and **let people sense** that their God is present. **Only God can rebuild you and me, and all our people, and every newcomer, into a people transformed and inspired to be God's people in times like these!**

In the parable of Jesus things didn't quite turn out the way the father expected. The first son, who answered, **"I will not,"** changed his mind and spent the entire day working in his father's vineyard.

The second son, the one who said, "I go, sir!" also had a change of mind. Maybe some of his friends came by and asked him to go with them – and he went! Whatever! The one who promised to help his father, did not.

Jesus asked the chief priests and the elders of the temple, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" "The first," they answered. The parable puzzled them. They did not understand that it was about them. They didn't even realize that they were the ones who failed to work in the vineyard of the Father in spite of their "yes"-saying of long ago! Others were now being called to replace them!

In a different time, long ago, some people missed the boat, bypassed the times of God and ended on a road to nowhere, because they were not tuned in, because they insisted on their own ways. That was certainly true of these officials. Jesus was standing in front of them and they failed to recognize him. The greatest events in the history of the world were taking place in their midst and they were missing the opportunity to be part of it. God was moving while they were talking and talking and letting Jesus pass them by.

I wonder if the religious officials finally got the point of Jesus' message. I wonder if you and I are getting the point. The message of God's invitation is for us as well. Sometimes we are blind to God's actions in our life. Sometimes we are all talk and no action. Sometimes we refuse to let God break into our lives and help us make a new start by His grace.

Call me an optimist if you want to – but I still believe with all my heart that Jesus' voice will never be silenced. God is still speaking and even today, this morning, through this pulpit, our God is calling people like us to follow!

God often visits us, but mostly we are not in! O, may you and I be present and ready and willing to heed God's call today! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today we would listen to his voice!

AMEN

