

Parable of the Two Sons and the Vineyard — How to Go to Heaven

Many parents have experienced teenagers who do not want to perform various chores around the home. Maybe a mother asked a daughter or a son to take out the trash, vacuum the floors, dust the furniture, or wash the dishes, and they refused to help. I know my mother rebuked me once for being ungrateful and unwilling to help after all that she and Dad had done for me. Or, maybe a son or daughter was eager to help dad paint the house or assist with a plumbing job. Maybe you are a parent who had one or both experiences. Possibly, you are a grateful child who promised to help and kept your promise. If you have had either experience, you will identify with this study. It comes from Matthew 21:28-32.

Two Types of People. It is still Tuesday, March 29, A.D. 33. Jesus will be betrayed on Thursday and His body will die on Friday. Earlier some members of the Sanhedrin Council had asked Jesus who had given Jesus the authority to do the things that He did. Jesus stopped their attempt to prod Him into saying something they could then use against Him.

Now Jesus urges these religious leaders to think about their hard hearts to spiritual things. He does this with a parable about two sons. He began with a question.

“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’”
Matthew 21:28 (NASB)

The parable is about a father, his two sons, and the family vineyard. Like most fathers, he asked his sons to help him accomplish some tasks in the field. We are told the father

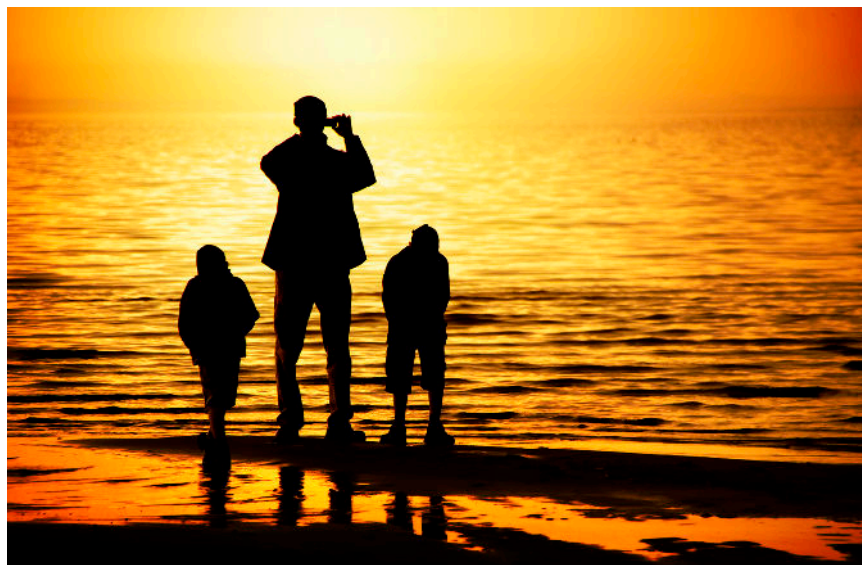
asked his first son to work in the vineyard that day!

“And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went.” Matthew 21:29 (NASB)

But the son did not want to work. So he said, “I will not.” The literal Greek says the son said, “I do not wish to do that.” He did not want to please his father. Maybe he was lazy or had other plans. Whatever his reason was, he refused to help.

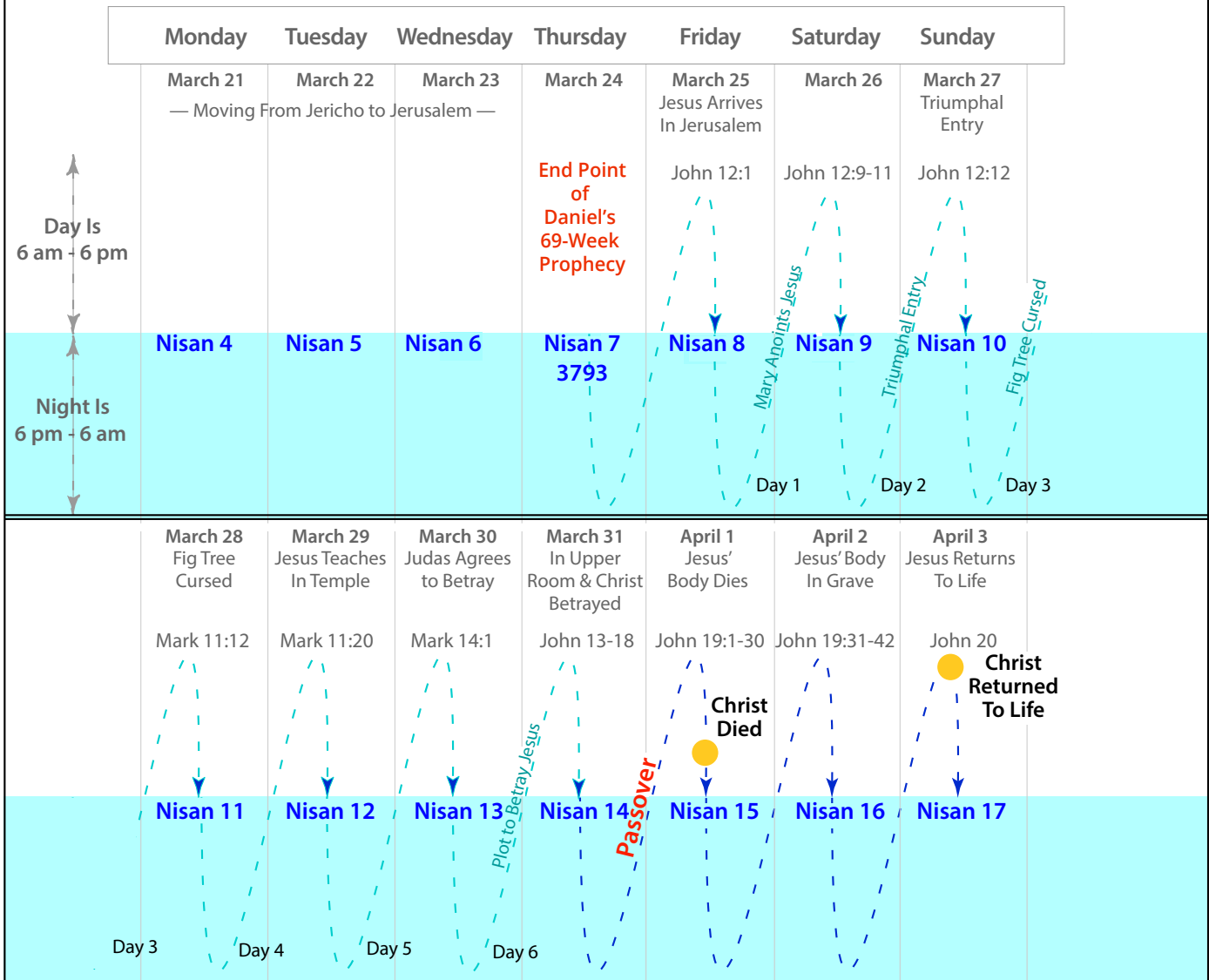
Then we are told the son regretted his reply. The Greek word that is translated as “regretted” is *metamelomai*. The

primary meaning of the word is to change one’s mind with the sense of regret. This older son changed his mind because he felt guilty about refusing to do the will of his father. But we are not given a reason as to why he changed his mind. Jesus is not concerned with the motives of the son’s refusal and regret.



Parable of Two Sons

Last Week of Jesus' Life



Jesus is only concerned with the words the son spoke and the change in his heart's attitude.

Then the father asked the second son if he would help.

“The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go.”

Matthew 21:30 (NASB)

This son literally replied with, “I, sir.” He replied like a soldier in the military. But the answer is clear. He agreed to do his father’s will. He would go into the vineyard and work,

but he later had a change of heart.

This parable reminds me of a time when my father asked my two brothers and me to cut down about twelve trees on our property during the summer months while we were not in school. We were to cut them down, remove the trunks of the trees from the ground, and put them in a pile. Later Dad planned to burn them. So, we eagerly did what Dad wanted. We promised to perform the task and we did.

But in this parable, one son said he would not work in the vineyard, repented, and then worked the vineyard. But the other son promised to work in the vineyard, then

disappointed his father.

Sign of Eternal Life. Then Jesus asked the religious leaders,

“Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” . . . Matthew 21:31a (NASB)

They answered correctly, “The first.” The first did the will of his father. We must remember Jesus had been teaching the crowds, Pharisees, and Sadducees about the will of the Father since the second year of His ministry. The earliest teaching about doing the will of God the Father is recorded in John 4:34. He said,

My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. John 4:34 (NASB)

Now Jesus was not trying to use Himself as an example of a person who did the will of the Father. Instead, He was explaining the purpose of His ministry. He was explaining why He had come and what He was trying to accomplish. He shared His desire to serve the Father with them.

This truth is made very clear in Hebrews 10:5-10 which records a conversation between the Father and the Son of God from eternity past. In verses 5-7, we learn that the Son of God volunteered to become the sacrifice that the Father desired in order to forgive our sins. Verses 8-10 are then a commentary on verses 5-7. The message is that Christ wanted to do the Father’s will and to become our vicarious sacrifice. Christ volunteered to be our sacrifice. That reveals God the Father and the Son of God, from eternity past, have always wanted to rescue us from the consequences of our sins. So, Jesus came for the purpose of doing the will of the Father.

Jesus repeated the message that He came to do the Father’s will several times (John 5:30; 6:38-40). He said that what He saw the Father do, that is what He did (John 5:19-22). Jesus copied the Father, and so should we. 1 Peter 1:15-16 tells us to be holy just as He is holy. We are to forgive others just as Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). We are to keep His commands (1 John 2:3-4). We are to keep

His word (1 John 2:5), and to love as the Father loves (1 John 2:6; 4:7-8, 11). Jesus has taught us that a true believer wants to obey the Father from the depths of our hearts. In 2 Corinthians 5:9, the apostle Paul said that his desire was to be pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ. So, we should also want to please Him by our attitudes and conduct. Christ did!

In Matthew 12:49b-50, Jesus said that those who do the Father’s will are His true family members.

“Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” Matthew 12:49b-50 (NASB)

In this passage Jesus’ consistent message is that He did the Father’s will and those who are part of His spiritual family will do the Father’s will too!

But Jesus has informed us that those who desire to do the will of the Father and do it are those who have been given eternal life. One well-known example is in Matthew 7:21-23 when Jesus said,

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’” Matthew 7:21-23 (NASB)

Jesus’ point was that only those who do the Father’s will enter heaven and have eternal life. Yet, the Holy Spirit tells us that no one can do the Father’s will unless they have believed in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. Only then will the Holy Spirit change our minds and hearts and give us a desire to please the Father (Galatians 5:16-23; Ephesians 3:16; 5:17-21). Only then will the Holy Spirit empower us in the inner person (Ephesians 3:16), and help us to live a

righteous life (Ephesians 5:17-18)

Later the apostles expanded upon this biblical truth. Five times in the New Testament we were explicitly taught that it is the will of the Father for us to be sexually pure (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8), to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:17-18), to suffer for Christ (1 Peter 4:19), to always give thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:18), and to submit to government (1 Peter 2:13-15). In a broad sense, we are then to strive to do the will of the Father from the depth of our hearts (Ephesians 6:6). Colossians 1:9 reveals that we should pray to be filled with the knowledge of the Father's will.

So, the overwhelming message of Scripture is that those who have heard the gospel about Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-8), believe they are sinners (Romans 3:23; 6:23), are repentant of their sins (Acts 11:18) are those who believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins (Romans 10:9-10). These are the true believers. One of the signs of a true believer is that he or she will confess that Jesus is their Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3). Then God will transform each believer so that they will do His will.

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:12-13 (NASB)

Then, when God the Father asks us to work in His vineyard, we will say, "I will." That is the sign someone has eternal life.

Sign of Eternal Punishment. Then Jesus greatly offended the members of the Sanhedrin Council who were with Him when He said . . .

"Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him." Matthew 21:31b-32a (NASB)

This was not the first time some members of the council were offended. Earlier Matthew 3:5-10 tells us that a massive number of people were going out into the wilderness to visit John the Baptist. But when the Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized, John refused to baptize them. Why? Matthew 3:7-9 reveals that they were not righteous men. They were not repentant and extremely proud. John explained that their conduct was like bad fruit from a tree. That is, they were a bad tree destined for the fire. They were evil men who only had a culture of religion. Sadly, there are too many people who are like them. They have grown up in a Christian culture and attended church most of their lives, but they are not real or true believers. That was these men. We can be confident that they were offended that John the Baptist was not overjoyed at the opportunity to baptize them. John did not want to baptize them because their hearts did not grieve their sins and turn away from their evil deeds.

Luke 7:24-39 records that a crowd, including some tax collectors, had acknowledged John the Baptist was the forerunner of Christ. But the Pharisees rejected that fact about John. The passage also reveals they themselves were condescending and wicked.

Then Matthew 15:8-14 tells us that some of the Pharisees were offended when Jesus warned us that what enters into our mouths does not defile us, but what comes out of our mouths defiles a man. Jesus' point was that what we say is what defiles us. Then in verses 12-14 Jesus told the disciples that the Pharisees were blind guides. Their teachings were evil.

These three passages (Matthew 3:5-10; Luke 7:24-39; Matthew 15:12-14) help us understand Jesus' comment, "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him." Those who responded to John the Baptist's call for repentance were those who clearly understood they had sinned and were sinners destined for hell. This is still true today. Those who respond to the gospel about Jesus Christ are those who are grieved by their own sins and fear hell. For Jude 22-23 says,

And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. Jude 22-23 (NASB)

Admission of sin, remorse over sin, and repentance are the prerequisite steps for a person seeking God's forgiveness of sins. True repentance accompanies true faith. Consequently, the tax collectors and prostitutes came to John to be baptized. His baptism was a ritual indicating a heartfelt confession and a repentance from their sin. They came looking for the Messiah about whom John was preaching.

Then Jesus warned them to repent and believe.

“And you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.” Matthew 21:32b (NASB)

Conclusion. Dr. McGee writes the following conclusion. He uses the term “publicans” rather than tax-collectors.”

This parable was a terrible insult to the religious rulers. Jesus likens them to the second son who said he would work for his father but did not. The Lord places publicans and harlots on a higher plane than these religious leaders.

The parable applies today. Many people today have joined the church, and are religious and think they are Christians, but they are not. They can perform their church rituals and give mental assent to the doctrines, but they are not genuine believers unless there has been a transformation in their lives.

The publicans and harlots recognized their sinfulness and came to Christ for salvation. They came late—at first they had said no to God, but they repented and came to Him, and He received them.¹

In sharp contrast, the members of the Sanhedrin Council claimed to be the righteous leaders, but when Christ appeared, they rejected Him and did not receive Him as Messiah and savior. Today, there are two types of brothers in our churches. Those who came to Jesus were remorseful, repentant, and believing in Jesus; the others have added Jesus to their lives. Their hearts have never changed. They attend church, they may be leaders in a church, but they do not serve God the Father from the depths of their hearts. Attending church and performing religious activities is part of a culture they have adopted.

There are two important points in our study that we must not miss. The first point we must not miss is revealed in this statement of Jesus, “And you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.” He reveals that sorrow over one's sins and repentance will accompany saving faith. This truth is repeated in several passages. In Luke 5:32, Jesus explained that He did not expect self-righteous sinners to repent.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Luke 5:32 (NASB)

Yet, Acts 17:30 adds that God calls all people to repent.

God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent. Acts 17:30b (NASB)

These two verses give us a picture that God is urging everyone to repent. But Jesus did not expect the self-righteous to grieve their sins. Only remorseful and repentant sinners will respond to the gospel as it is given to everyone. We must not miss 2 Corinthians 7:10, which directly connects repentance as part of salvation.

For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. 2 Corinthians 7:10 (NASB)

¹ J. Vernon McGee. Matthew through Romans. Thru the Bible. Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1983. p. 113-114.

Notice that sorrow is connected to repentance. The message

Life and Heart of Jesus

The Last Week - March A.D. 33

	Parables About Religious Leaders	Jesus Is Questioned	Questioned by Sadducees	Questioned by Pharisees	Jesus Asked A Question	Pharisees Rebuked	Jesus Laments Jerusalem	Poor Widows' Gift	Beginning of Birth Pangs
Matthew	21:28-22:14	22:15-22	22:23-33	22:34-40	22:41-46	23:1-36	23:37-39		24:1-14
Mark	12:1-12	12:13-17	12:18-27	12:28-34	12:35-37	12:38-40		12:41-44	13:1-13
Luke	20:9-19	20:20-26	20:27-40		20:41-44	20:45-47		21:1-4	21:5-19
John									

is that repentance will not occur without sorrow. Why repent if you feel good about yourself? Another important verse is Acts 11:18.

Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life. Acts 11:18b (NASB)

Now we see that remorse and sorrow lead to repentance, which must accompany salvation or eternal life.

Second, we must not miss the fact that Jesus rebuked them for not believing when He said they “did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.” He said that they were not righteous men. Jesus insulted them since they had deceived themselves into believing they were righteous. He condemned them for not believing. Why did Jesus do that since God the Father chose them for salvation from the foundation of the world? Scripture tells us that the Father has sovereignly chosen those who would believe (John 6:37, 44, 65). Ephesians 1:3-6 says that before the foundation of the world, the Father chose people to be saved. Therefore, Acts 13:48 says that “as many as had been appointed to

eternal life believed.”

So, why did Jesus rebuke them for not believing? The answer is that Hyper-Calvinism and humanistic Arminianism are wrong, for only Jesus is correct. Both are true! The Father selected people to believe in Christ, and people are urged to believe in Christ. Remember Jesus rebuked these religious leaders for not believing in Christ, but earlier He declared that no man can believe in Him without the Father’s permission (John 6:37, 44, 65). The point is that both are true. God selected those who would believe and He calls people to believe. When someone believes in Christ, it is real because it is real. They want to believe. Yet, God the Father sovereignly selected them and drew them by the Holy Spirit. We just do not understand how both can be true and how both work together. Charles Spurgeon said,

Some have doubted whether predestination is consistent with the free agency of man. We believe that man does as he pleases, yet notwithstanding he always does as God decrees.

In summary, this parable teaches us that true believers hate this sin, believe in Jesus Christ, and want to work in the vineyard of God the Father. So, are you like the tax collectors and prostitutes or the religious leaders? Which one describes you?

