

A Parable for Beginners

Meta

Date: September 27, 2026

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

Psalms 25 or 25:1–14

Philippians 2:1–13

Matthew 21:28–32

Opening

Alright, I'm going to tell a story I've told before. But it's been 2018 since I told this one, so if you remember it, consider me impressed.

When I was a junior in high school, the movie *Braveheart*, was released to tremendous worldwide acclaim, with one notable exception at Central High School. A few of my friends went to see *Braveheart* in release week, but when I asked one buddy what he thought, he was emphatic, 'Terrible. Worst. Movie. Ever.' I couldn't believe it because all my other friends loved it, and everything about this movie should have appealed to my friend.

One week later he came back and he said, 'Guys, I stand corrected about *Braveheart*. Best. Movie. Ever. You know, what happened? The first time we went, we got to the theatre late and it had already started—and by already started I mean it had been running for an hour and a half. When you see the movie start to finish, it makes a huge difference.'

The Story and the Backstory

We have a full, albeit brief story before us today in the parable of the two sons, one of my favorite stories in the Gospels. But we're entering this conversation midstream—we missed part one of the conversation when Jesus told this parable. There's a backstory to this little story that makes all the difference to the way we understand this parable. (You may find it helpful to follow today's reading on page ### of your pew Bible).

Here's the immediate background of this parable. We're in the Temple and it's the day after Palm Sunday—Monday of Holy Week. After he entered the Temple on Palm Sunday, Jesus turned over tables and money boxes in the Temple because it had become an outdoor market, not a house of prayer. He then turned his attention to the blind and disabled in the Temple, healing them of their afflictions. The next day, a delegation of chief priests and elders came to him with an accusing question, 'Who

gave you authority to do these things?’ That’s *when* Jesus told this parable, the immediate backstory to this little story.

To the elders’ accusations about authority, Jesus changed the subject. Now, when you’re speaking about one topic and Jesus changes the subject, hold onto to your hat. Jesus asks the elders a question — what about John the Baptist and the baptism of repentance? Was John’s authority from heaven or man-made?

The Vineyard of Repentance

They basically plead the fifth, saying ‘We don’t know.’ Seems safe. Exercising their right to remain silent, so to speak, sensing that anything they say could be used against them, standing as they were before Jesus in the Temple. And so they choose the mushy middle about John and his baptism of repentance, opting for fence-sitting to save face, but Jesus doesn’t move on. He stays on this subject when he says, ‘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.’

The figure of a vineyard is a preeminent symbol throughout Scripture, especially in the Gospels, especially in the final week of Jesus' life. We heard a vineyard parable last week, we hear a mini-parable in a vineyard setting today. Guess what's coming next Sunday? The Parable of Wicked Tenants in, you guessed it, a vineyard. A vineyard trifecta of Sundays.

Symbols can have multiple meanings in Scripture, and so it is with a vineyard. In this story, the vineyard represents a field of holiness. Going to work in that field means doing the work of repentance. When we enter this parable, the vineyard is the vineyard of repentance.

Two Sons and the Two Postures Within

A father approaches two sons to work in the vineyard. To the first he says, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' The son answers, 'I will not.' Pretty brazen. Nope. A hard-no from me, pops. Not a chance. The first son's rudeness is bracing, especially when we consider this is a traditional culture. The plot twist here is that he gets past that first refusal, gets over himself, turns himself around, and gets to work.

The second son puts a good face on it from the start. His father asks him to do the same task and he replies, 'I will, sir.' Another translation renders it, 'I will, my lord.' Sound etiquette, good grammar, strong deferential delivery. I imagine him giving an pretentious bow: 'I will, my Lord.' Well played. So it seems.

But he never begins. Never walks through the gate. Never enters the field. Never puts his hand to the vine. No clearing, no pruning, no harvesting. Had a nice polished answer from his lips, but never truly responds with his feet. He never begins.

When Jesus' little parable ends, we learn this has been an allegory all along. Tax collectors and women of ill repute represent the first son. The son who initially gave a hard no, then got beyond it and got to work. The chief priests and elders represent the second son. The son who mastered appearances, but never entered the walked through the gate of repentance.

Then Jesus brings home the prophetic point of this story:

*For John came to you (chief priests and elders) in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it (their repentance), you did not afterward change **your** minds and believe him.*

More to the Backstory

Now I mentioned the Holy Week backstory to today's parable, but there's still more to the backstory. To riff on the legendary Paul Harvey, we have yet to hear the rest of the backstory that makes today's parable so rich.

We're in Holy Week, the final week of Jesus' life, but when Jesus mentions John coming to the elders in the way of righteousness, we're right back at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. John came preaching about righteousness, calling all to 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'

Pharisees and Sadducees show up when John is baptizing at the River Jordan, but they aren't serious about repentance. They're keeping up appearances because crowds were surging in the wilderness to follow John's message. And what was John the Baptist's instruction to the Pharisees all the way back in Matthew 3 in those early days before Jesus appeared on the scene? 'Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.' Vineyard image noted.

John the Baptist gave a serious warning back then to Pharisees who just wanted to keep up their appearances:

'Do not presume and say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

Now we have the full backstory: the elders of Jerusalem have heard the call of repentance for three years, a call couched in this image of bearing fruit, and here we are in Holy Week. Nothing had happened. They are the second son who never walked through the gate.

The Single Step of Repentance

Not so, for the tax collectors and sinners. Before John the Baptist came on the scene, these were ones who consistently rejected the calling of God to live a holy life. But when John called them to the way of righteousness; when he announced baptism with water for repentance, the most notorious sinners in all Israel changed their minds. They turned around. Entered the water. And then got to work in the field, the vineyard of their souls.

There's no telling the depth of white collar crimes these tax collectors had committed before they came to John to be baptized. But when they changed their mind, they asked John, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' John did not give them a full program. He gave them one instruction, one action. Many other actions would be needed to continue in the way of repentance. Many, many more things would need to be changed, mended, healed, and restored from their past lives, their past actions. But John left that for later. One thing was important when tax collectors came to John in the brokenness—beginning. Entering the vineyard of their repentance.

'Teacher what shall we do?' And John the Baptist gave them one action to get started, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.'¹ And with that simple beginning, they got to work.

And Jesus says, three years later, that of such notorious sinners who changed their minds, after their adamant refusals; who began working in the field of their repentance, these will enter the Kingdom of God.

Don't Wait for a Pure Heart

My brothers and sisters, in our hearts we have a great struggle. We struggle with the spirit of Pharisees and the chief priests within. We do not want to appear broken. We want to remain presentable and respectable, but we don't want to face our true emptiness.

¹ Luke 3.13

We struggle in our hearts to follow the pattern of tax collectors and notorious sinners. But rest assured, in this parable and throughout his Gospel, the Lord Jesus has made them into icons of repentance. Images worthy of our imitation. For these dear souls don't wait until they are presentable and respectable to get started. They know their emptiness, but they begin anyway.

Who is the man with the right attitude of prayer? Is it the Pharisee who prays the liturgical prayers of Israel with a great sonic voice, like the voice of a narrator on audiobooks? No, it is the publican, the tax collector, who won't even lift up his eyes because he's mourning his sins, yet he still prays, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' This is the man who will be justified. This is the one to imitate. Blessed are those who turn their face to Jesus when they aren't presentable. Blessed are those who know they are a mess, who pray to Jesus from their brokenness, and get to work on their repentance anyway.

The Deed Redeems

One of my favorite TV presenters is the legendary British gardener Monty Don. He's best known for his show, *Gardener's World*, which shows him cultivating plants, flower beds, and an orchard at his beloved estate called Longmeadow. But he also had a show called *Big Dreams, Small Spaces* where he would work with amateur gardeners who had vision and dreams of thriving vegetable gardens and showstopper flower beds. So many of these episodes Monty turns up to the home and the site for the garden was overgrown. Weeds, brush, briars, ivy, you name it. Before any planting could begin, the clearing stage came first. Some of those episodes you could just feel secondary stress seeing how much work they had to do. But in every instance, Monty Don would just dive in and start clearing things out. His nice presenter's jacket cast aside, he began working straightaway, sweating through the dress shirt.

I found the clearing segment to be one of my favorite parts of the show. Something very satisfying about seeing that happen, especially when you're watching someone else do hard work. By the end of the episode, of course, you see a transformation accomplished that seemed impossible when Monty arrived on the scene.

Blessed are those who begin their work of repentance, even with the smallest of beginnings. Do not be overwhelmed by all that needs doing. Walk through the gate and do the obvious things first.

When you get to work on your heart and your habits, do not be troubled that you don't have entirely pure motives. If we wait on the right mood, the right motivation, or feeling like we have purely good motives, we'll never begin.

Yes, the Lord wants us to be pure in heart, but let's not pretend if we don't have a pure heart. Let's say you want to become patient, but you realize that within you is *not only* the desire to be patient but also to be known or perceived as a patient person. 'Oh, I thought I was impatient but now I'm seeing how vain I am.' Let not that vain, selfish motive keep you frozen. Walk through the gate and enter the field of repentance with your mess, even when you see a bit more ugliness in your heart. Present your impure motives before the Lord and begin. I love this prayer for the morning that says, 'O Lord, save me whether I want it or not.'

The great 20th century Jewish rabbi, Abraham Heschel, taught that the deed redeems the mixed motives of the heart. Our actions change the heart. Heschel said:

What we feel primarily is our inability to feel adequately ... (But) to him who strives with heart and soul to give himself to God and who succeeds as far as is within his power, the gates of greatness break open and he is able to attain that which is beyond his power. What he may not dare to think, he often utters in deeds.... The heart is revealed in the deeds.²

One of the best words in the spiritual life is 'begin.' Here's a phrase from the Benedictine tradition: 'Always we begin again.' I think that's the reason that broken sinners are examples for us. When their sins are known, when they have been stripped of their pride, they come to Jesus without airs, with their mess, and they are ready to begin.

Closing

This parable is a masterful story, an allegory of the Gospel. But let us remember that it's not entirely fictional. Not when you consider who wrote this Gospel, St. Matthew, whose feast day we celebrated last Monday. Matthew not only wrote this story, he has lived this story. When Jesus was walking through Galilee one day, he came to a tax booth—Matthew's workplace. A simple invitation, 'Follow me.' And Matthew rose. He left the tax booth behind. He began. He followed Jesus.

Following Jesus, he came to a house. This is Matthew 9.

And behold many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

Matthew's colleagues and many notorious ne'er do wells. All of them a mess, all of them beginning. All following Jesus into the vineyard of their repentance. All walking into the very kingdom of God where the Lord brings forth the fruit of righteousness from the most broken people. Who become not only repentant sinners, but storytellers and evangelists and apostles of this great kingdom where Christ is King, reigning with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, unto ages of ages. Amen.

² Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 284.