MATTHEW 21:28–32. (EHV)

> "What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.' He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went. He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, 'I will go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him."

What do you think?

Jesus presents this hypothetical situation with the two sons while he is in the temple courts during Holy Week, right after the chief priests and the elders of the Jews have attempted to question his teaching authority. Jesus is at the end of his patience with them, and so now, after countering their attack, he goes on the offensive. But he doesn't do this just to get even. He does it as a teacher who still wants them to know and accept the truth, and a good teacher will still tell you that it is better, if possible, to get a student to arrive at the truth on his own than to simply tell him the truth. That's what Jesus does here.

"What do you think?" he asks. And then he tells them about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go today and work in the vineyard."

But the son answered, "I will not." But later he changed his mind and did so.

The man went to his second son and told him to do the same. "Go today and work in the vineyard."

"Yes, sir," the son replies, but then he didn't actually go and work in the vineyard.

"Which of the two did the will of his father?" Jesus then asked.

And they answered, "The first one."

And Jesus in essence tells them, "You are absolutely correct. And that is why you will be condemned if you do not repent."

In his answer to the Jewish leaders, Jesus explains the parable to us. There are two kinds of children of God. Now we of course want to be careful when we describe all people as children of God. We need to make clear what we are saying and what we are not saying. I have heard people say, "We're all God's children," and what they meant was that it doesn't matter what we believe or what church we go to; we're all going to the same place anyway. That's a convenient religion, because it basically says that we don't need to take anything seriously and we can believe and live however we want to the extent that we can get away with it. That's a convenient religion, but it's not true religion.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which we can say that all people are God's children. All people are created and preserved by God. Without God they wouldn't be here. And the heart of God is filled with love for all the humans he has made. He wants all of them to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. He wants all to work in his vineyard, to have a life filled with purpose and willing labor for him.

So in a way we can call all people children of God. But Jesus says there are two kinds of children of God—those who do God's will and those who don't. And Jesus explains how they do or don't.

Let's start with the second kind of child. The second kind, when the father, representing the heavenly Father, comes and says, "Go today and work in the vineyard," responds, "Yes, sir *or* I will go, sir." We have a word that we really only use nowadays in the military and in business meetings, the word *aye*—A-Y-E. Even though it's spelled A-Y-E, if you look up the origin of that word in the dictionary, it says that it probably comes from I, as in the letter I, as in me, myself, and I. It was a shorthand way of expressing agreement and willingness. We still see the usefulness of this shorthand way today. If I'm a child and my parents tell me to do something, "Alright" or "Okay" is fine, but if I say, "Aye," I'm acknowledging that they have the authority to give me the command and I'm going to get it done pronto.

In the original Greek, that's what the second son says to his father: "Aye, sir," or even, "Aye, master." That is, "I agree that you have the authority to give me this command and I'll hop right to it." In other words, the second kind of son gives the best possible answer on the outside. Since the master in this parable is obviously the Lord, this son looks like he is religious in the best kind of way.

But…he doesn't actually go and work in the vineyard.

As we learn though, it's not because he intends not to work in the vineyard. We know that he has every intention of working in the vineyard, because Jesus says that the Jewish leaders are the second kind of son, and on the outside they appeared to be doing God's will, they appeared to be saying, "Aye, sir. Yes, sir," to God's commands. The problem was that they thought they could work in God's vineyard and do his will by their own strength and virtue.

That is why Jesus says the prostitutes and tax collectors were entering the kingdom of God ahead of them. By the time the gospel came to the prostitutes and tax collectors, they realized there was no way they could enter God's vineyard on their own merits. Their résumé wasn't worth looking at and they had no good references. All they could do was repent of their sin and hope for the heavenly Father's mercy.

The Jewish leaders on the other hand didn't have repentance at the center of their religion. They thought that God would look more favorably on them if they didn't have to repent, and so they worked with might and main to do the right things.

But Jesus says that isn't doing God's will. That is like saying, "Aye, sir," with your lips, but then not actually doing anything that God wants you to do.

Now let's look closer at the first kind of child, though we have sort of touched on him already. The first kind of child, when his father comes and tells him to work in the vineyard, not only says no, he says, "I will not *or* I don't want to *or* I refuse."

Tell me—and I know both of these scenarios are bad—but tell me, if you were to tell your child to come help you with something—clearing the table, changing the oil in the vehicle, you name it—which response would you rather hear, a straight "No" or "I don't want to"? I don't know about you, but I'd rather take the No. I wouldn't want to hear the No, but the No doesn't tell me anything about the reason. "I don't want to" tells me not only that he won't do it, but that

he won't do it because he doesn't like what I want. Basically he's saying, "You don't tell me what to do; I have better things to do than what you want."

That's what the first kind of child says to God when the invitation to work in his vineyard comes to him or her: "I don't want to." But later, Jesus says, he changes his mind and goes. He compares this kind of child to the tax collectors and prostitutes, who spent the beginning part of their lives being selfish and greedy, seeking money and pleasure, but who later said, "I'm all wrong. Father, please be merciful to me and let me work in your vineyard."

A preacher named John Chrysostom worked in Antioch in Syria from 386–397. During that time, he also preached a series of sermons on Matthew, including one on this text. And he tells the story of an actual prostitute who came from what is today the city of Finiq in southern Albania, a city which he calls a "most lawless city." She ended up working as a prostitute in Antioch. Chrysostom says she had first honors on the stage and her name was known everywhere, not just in Antioch but throughout much of modern day Turkey. She ruined people in many different positions. Some even accused her of sorcery, saying that she didn't just seduce people with her beauty, but also with potions and drugs. She had even seduced the brother of the empress.

But all at once, she was found in the midst of the Christian Church. She confessed all of her evils as such and, as Chrysostom says, brought down upon herself God's grace. She was baptized and instructed and partook of Holy Communion. And while nothing was more vile than she was when she was on the stage before, now there were few who were more modest than she was. Some tried to bring her back to the stage by force, but she would not go with them. She did her best not to allow any of the men who had previously been with her even to catch a glimpse of her, in case she or they might be tempted.

That prostitute did God's will. That prostitute entered the kingdom of God before most of the chief priests and teachers of the law and Pharisees, before most of the monks and nuns, before many regular churchgoers, before anyone who thinks that they can earn God's favor by their own merit and works.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes entered the kingdom of God through repentance. And what makes repentance so great? Because in repentance we acknowledge the truth about who we are and who we must always remain if we are left to ourselves, regardless of whether we have the occupation of tax collector or prostitute or not, and in repentance we acknowledge the truth about who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. Repentance is sorrow over sin, first, and then also faith in God's forgiveness and grace in Christ. Jesus says, "John came to you to show you the way of righteousness," and what was the way of righteousness John preached? A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and the good news that the kingdom of heaven had drawn near through the appearance of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. The sons of the second kind did not repent of their sin and believe that message, because they didn't think they had to. The sons of the first kind did.

How were the sons of the first kind able to repent and be forgiven just like that? Because there is also a third kind of son. Jesus doesn't mention it because none of his audience fall into that category. Only one man did, Jesus himself. Jesus was the third kind of son, the one who not

only said, “Aye, sir,” to his Father’s will, but then went and did it faithfully, without any sin to repent of. He earned righteousness for us. He merited eternal life for us.

“Go today, be born of a virgin in a stable.”

“Aye, Lord.”

“Go today, preach the good news, heal the sick, raise the dead.”

“Aye, Lord.”

“Go today, be condemned to death by crucifixion, bear the sins of all people and bear the eternal punishment for those sins.”

“Aye, Lord.”

“Go from the tomb today. Rise and be done with sin forever. Rise and die no more.”

“Aye, Lord.”

And he did. All of it.

That is why he can come to us today and say, “Go today and work in my vineyard.”

But this is primarily what he means: Don’t think you can do this work on your own. Rather, repent of the sinful work that is properly yours, and put your faith in the holy work that is properly his. In so doing, his holy work actually becomes yours, and you are thereby strengthened to do the holy things that please him.

Repent, brothers and sisters. Don’t be the second kind of son. Be the first, because of the third, Jesus your Substitute and Savior. Amen.