

Copyright September 27, 2020. Geist Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

Title: Second Thoughts

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Text: [Matthew 21:23-32](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



Don't wish time away. That was something I was taught when young, when I couldn't wait for something to come. Were you that way? I couldn't wait to start school, couldn't wait for birthdays, to get a driver's license, to graduate and go to college. Whenever I was guilty of pining for the future, my father would say, "don't wish your life away. Life is

precious. Don't be in a hurry to get to tomorrow. "

I've thought about this over the last few months because I've heard many examples of it. Many of us are wishing time away. We want to get to the other side of this pandemic quicker. We'd like to get past the election or to the end of the hurricane and fire season. I've heard, time and again, "I wish 2020 was over." We are in a hurry for tomorrow. In most of these things, if not all of them, tomorrow can't come fast enough.

Well, I can, for the few minutes that you invest in listening, send us into the future. It is Holy Week and Jesus has another parable for us. I know that I'm ahead of the story. Holy Week is six months off. It is the last week of March next year. Can you imagine what it will be like in six months? Election over, natural disasters behind us, and hopefully, the beginning of the end of the pandemic. But for now, it is just an imaginary experience to understand the context.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, telling stories all week long. If you read back a few verses from our lesson, you will find his triumphal entry. You will also read that he cleanses the temple. Those experiences set up this parable. It is an explanation to a question, put to Jesus by the chief priests and elders. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23b)

We might say today "Who made you boss? Who gave you the authority to clean up the temple? And who gives you the authority to teach around here?"

Tell us." They are mad because they are the ones who give out the credentials. They are the organization behind organized religion. This is their show. They are the authorities who speak for God.¹

But the chief priests and the elders also know that Jesus thinks that he speaks for God. They want him to say it, out loud. That is the trap behind the question. If we didn't authorize you to do the crazy new things you're doing and saying, who did? Say it, Jesus. Say what you believe. Say God authorized you! Tell everybody loudly and clearly that you think you are working for God." If Jesus does, they will shout, "Gotcha. That's blasphemy!"

Jesus recognizes the trap and isn't going to stick his foot in it. He says, "I will but answer a question first." "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" (Matthew 21:25) It was a trick question and they know it. If they say from heaven then Jesus will say, "Why didn't you believe him?" If they say, human, the crowd will come unglued as they believe John was a prophet. So they say, "We don't know." "Well, then I won't answer your question about authority," Jesus says. "Instead, I'll tell you a story" and he does.

It begins with a famous line. "A man had two sons." People get excited when they hear that line because they think, "I know this. It's the Prodigal Son. I love this story." Only this isn't the man with two sons story that is told in the 15th chapter of Luke. This is the story about a father with two sons found in Matthew. This father has a conversation with both of his sons. I suspect it was at breakfast because it is my observation that some people are breakfast people and others are not. Have you made this observation? ²

I've noticed this in our family and they will tell you the same. I like getting up in the morning and generally get out of bed with a song on my tongue. I don't need to smell the coffee or have a cup to find a positive attitude. Some in our family haven't always appreciated such early cheerfulness. I had to learn this about our kids, particularly when they were teenagers. They didn't necessarily appreciate wake-up songs about rising and shining and giving God the glory. And because I learned this, I realized that stating expectations or obligations before breakfast wasn't always well-received, if even heard.

The father in the story didn't know this about one of his sons because he went to the first, let's call him Joe, and makes a request. He says, "Joe, it's harvest time and I need some help. Will you go to work in the vineyard?" Joe says, "No, I will not!" It doesn't take much imagination to add more dialogue. This is a surly, angry response from a boy that doesn't even want

to talk until he's had a bowl of Cheerios. You can fill in the blanks. "I'm sick and tired of grapes. I've been working out in that stupid vineyard too much. I go around with purple hands. I've had it and I want a few days with my buddies. And stop singing in the morning." Maybe he said all of those things or maybe he just said "No!"

Either way, how does that sit with you? If the story stops right then and there, how do you feel about Joe? I can tell you how many in the first century would have heard the story. Rejection of a father was like rejecting the father. It was blasphemy. You get the connection now, don't you? It doesn't sit well with us but it was really bad back then, grounds for capital punishment as written in the law (Exodus 21:15,17).³

The story doesn't stop there. Jesus says, "He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went." (Matthew 21:29) Joe had second thoughts and decided that he needed to go to the vineyard. And he does. The Greek word used in the passage is "metamelomai" (μεταμεληθεῖς) which could be just as easily translated repent or regret. He regretted his outburst, repented from his disrespect, and changed his mind. Even though he said no, he had second thoughts and worked in the vineyard after all. That's the first half of the story.

The second half overlaps the first half so we've got to go back to breakfast. The father talks to the second son, let's call him Moe. Moe, he says. "Yes, sir." That's the way I grew up. "Yes sir, no sir. Yes, ma'am, no ma'am." Some think it sounds sassy but in the south, it is a sign of respect.

This boy respects his father and I can tell that he is a joy at breakfast. Give him credit for this. "Moe, will you go to the vineyard?" Moe says, "I'm awfully glad you suggested that, Father. I was thinking this morning that I would love to go work in the vineyard. I love vineyards. After all, I realize that we are saving up money so that we can go to college. So, I just can't wait to get out there and do my share to help this family. Thanks, Dad, for the suggestion. Mother, you better put another steak on because I'm going to go out there and work all day. I'll be real hungry at supper." Maybe he said all of those things or maybe just "I go, sir!"

Either way, how does this sit with you? If the story stops then and there, how do you feel about Moe? I can tell you how many in the first century would have felt about the story. This son knows the commandment to honor your father and your mother. There wasn't even a tiny hint of rejection of his father, not even a wisp of blasphemy. He knows the law and lives it out. Good for Moe; he is not at all like Joe.

But the story doesn't stop there. Jesus says that Moe "...answered, "'I go, sir'; but he did not go \." (Matthew 21:30) Even though Moe said yes, he didn't go to the vineyard after all. He may have never intended to go. At the very least, he didn't give it a second thought about what it meant to say one thing and do another. He didn't think what it would mean to say yes, but not honor his father's request. Have you ever been around people like that, who are cheerful, agreeable, well-meaning? They tell you what you want to hear but don't follow through.

It's funny. Sometimes when Jesus tells a parable, he just ends it and leaves you hanging. Like the other story with a man with two sons, the Prodigal Son. He just ends the story and lets you come to your conclusions. But other times, he ends with a question like this one. And the question is, "which of the two sons does well at supper?" Well, that's not exactly what the question is but I think that's the intent of Jesus' question. When supper comes around and Joe and Moe put their feet under their dad's table, who feels good about the day? "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (Matthew 21:31a)

They didn't think this was a trick question. So they answer quickly. "They said, the first." (Matthew 21:31b) I suppose Jesus could have said "gotcha" and it is sort of what he said. He looked them in the eye and told them that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going to the front of the kingdom of God line ahead of them. "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." (Matthew 21:32). You didn't believe it. You didn't even give it a second thought. They didn't and won't.

It is amazing how Jesus seems to understand human nature. He tells a good story, one which just about everyone can relate. It was told two thousand years ago to the chief priests and elders and it is told to us. It's told about their spiritual life and it's told about ours. That's the genius of Jesus' storytelling because we've all known Joe's and Moe's and the way they act. We've known Joe's who are negative but in the end, do the right thing, and Moe's who talk a good talk but are pretty much worthless when it comes to following through.

Wait a minute, on second thought, maybe that's not what Jesus is pointing out. Maybe he's asking, are you a Joe or Moe? Let's try that on.

Are you like Joe, a reluctant believer who isn't too sure about the challenges and claims Jesus places on your life? Your first instinct is "I don't think so. You had to think twice about how committed you want to be, think about whether you want to truly be a giving, compassionate, servant of Christ.

After all, the stakes are high and the demands are great following Jesus. But in the end, you give it a try even though you at first think, "This is impossible."

Or are you more like Moe, who says the right things with the right attitude? When it comes to Jesus, you say yes, Lord. We worship you, Lord. We love you. You're wonderful. And you do worship him. You are present almost every Sunday. But you have no intention of going into the vineyard. You talk a good talk but you don't walk the walk. It is just too demanding, too challenging.

Joe or Moe? Maybe you are somewhere in between. I appreciate that viewpoint. But that's not the way Jesus tells the story. It didn't start "a man had three sons." That's a sixties TV show. His story is "a man had two sons." Jesus wants us to decide between the two. It is the purpose of the story, well thought through because clearly, this story has legs. It preaches as well in 2020 A.D as it did in 33 A.D. But that's taking us into the past and this sermon is about looking to the future, so let's stay with that.

I don't want to wish life away. It's too precious. I don't want to be in a hurry to get to tomorrow, especially the eternal tomorrow. But just so you understand. When it comes to Joe or Moe, who will be blessed for doing the will of the Father? Who will, when seated at the Lord's Table in the kingdom of God, feel good about suffering? Joe or Moe?

Which are you? I hope you'll give that a second thought.

¹ Blount, Brian. What Do You Know? Matthew 21:23-32. Retrieved at asermonforeversunday.org.

² Palmer, Earl. A Durable Hope. August 2005. Retrieved by subscription at preachingtoday.org.

³ Langley, W. E. (1996). The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) against Its Semitic and Rabbinic Backdrop. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 58(2), 228–243.