

## *The energy to care is born of repentance.*

A man had two sons according to Matthew chapter 21. He went to the first and said, "Son, go to work in our vineyard today." The person answered, "I will not." Afterwards, however, he repented and went.

It's easy to slide over the phrase "he repented and went," and end up with a distorted reading of the parable – something simplistic such as, "actions speak louder than words," "put your money where your mouth is," "walk the talk." That is not the meaning of the parable.

The first son "repented" before he went, which indicates that his thoughts and words had changed before he started pruning the vines and pulling the weeds. He did not go to the vineyard in spite of saying "no." Rather, he went to the vineyard because he had changed his "no" to "yes." He had repented, and when he performed the action, word and deed were one.

Without repentance, the first son's eventual obedience would have been as ineffectual as the second son's doing nothing. We've all experienced the help that people give occasionally when their hearts are not in the task at hand. So resistant to the spirit of the job is

their demeanor that their presence assumes the nature of a burden. Sometimes we say in exasperation, "Why don't you just leave? I can see you don't really want to be here." Those are the words my mother once said to me when I showed up for work at our family business as a petulant teenager, full of myself and not wanting to be there. The words slapped me aside the head and called me either to "shape up or ship out."

Christians who show love and care and justice through clenched teeth do not provide an accurate reflection of the gospel. Of course, the opposite is also true: fine words but no action dissipate as quickly as mist in sunlight.

If we first say "no" in response to the gospel, we may stand a better chance of eventually realizing our need to repent. Our initial "no" may make us more honest about gospel demands and our limitations. For if we pronounce the unthinking "yes," we may assume that to be faithful and to live the values of the gospel are easy.

I propose that we do two things. First, deliberately make our first response to the gospel "no." Then, secondly, list all of our reasons for refusing Christ: it is too hard to take up the cross; if we love our enemies, they will only take advantage of us; if we don't worry

about tomorrow, the bank and the creditors will take care of it. We can be candid about how hard the gospel is.

In our candor, let us also acknowledge the kind of world that our “no” to the gospel produces: children with extended stomachs; stockpiles of weapons that can obliterate life on earth; obsessive fears about money; violence in the streets and terrorism.

But look at another example. Someone asks if we will serve on a committee. Knowing the job is important, feeling flattered to be asked and wanting to serve the community, we say, “yes, I will.” We have every intention of doing the best possible job. Then we go to the first meeting. We listen and watch, trying to figure out our role, and we begin to feel in our stomach, “this job is not for me.” Either we resign, or we fail to show up for meetings, or we go but find ourselves gradually withdrawing from the work. Hypocrisy is not the issue here. The matter is more complex: we did not realize how profoundly the task would affect us. Our “yes” was well intended but facile and naive. It came before we were converted to the task.

Sometimes the story goes in reverse. We are asked to serve and we say, “No, that’s not for me.” But we go home and we cannot sleep. We keep thinking, “It’s time I did something about this. Now I have the opportunity. It will be hard work; if I have to make some changes to get the job done, then I’ll change.” So we go to the meeting and are greeted with puzzlement, “I thought you said no.” To which we reply, “I changed my mind.” We throw ourselves into the task with abandon, because really we have changed, and we have “repented.”

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