

## OBEDIENT CHILDREN

Matthew 21:28-32

Despite what politicians tell us, our economy depends a lot more on what the private sector does or what happens in the world around us. Our federal government may be involved with the clean up after the storm on August 10 and the hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, but it was the utilities who hired extra crew from around the country, preparations and contributions made from companies and local governments who are doing the lion's share. Our best regulators in our own government, like the Fed, are nonpolitical. And the best way to stop the spread of the disease is when people take the initiative to do the right things.

That doesn't surprise us because our general thoughts about politicians are that they are all words and no action. They may look good on the screen, but what are they really doing? We say, "Put your money where your mouth is," or "Actions speak louder than words," or "Talk is cheap—even peanuts cost money."

With all the options we have for watching films and shows many watch old TV shows. But if you look at them, things can appear to move slowly compared to what is done today. Movies can be carried on today completely by their actions and effects without having to have much plot, dialogue, or acting. The action has become more important than the words.

Jesus' parable seems to agree with that. Jesus tells the story of two sons. The father asks the first to do something, and he says, "No." Then he changes his mind and does what His father said. The second son says, "Yes," to his father, then doesn't do as he promised. Jesus asks, "Which one did the will of his father, the first or the second?" The obvious answer is the first one, who let his actions speak his words.

It is easy then to fill in for the second son the enemies of Jesus. They seemed to talk a good talk, but never really do anything. They say all kinds of pious things, but what did they do?

But that claim could be put against the church today. What is the church really today to help people distanced by the pandemic? Yes we provide online worship services, but couldn't that be done by just a few big churches that can

provide high quality videos? Wouldn't our finances be better used feeding the hungry or building new houses in the areas hit by the hurricanes?

Jesus' parable does not involve two workers. It involves two sons. Getting the work done is not as important as their obedience to their father. The father would be upset not so much by the fact that the work would not get done, but that his sons did not obey him. Far more important than the work was the relationship between the father and his sons.

This relationship was so important in the Old Testament. Sons were not just cheap labor for the fathers. They were how the fathers would live on. Yes, fathers wanted their sons to obey them and get the work done, but even more they wanted their sons to do it for the right reason—out of respect and love for their fathers. It is what people can feel about the “family farm.” You keep it going not just to make a living, but to carry on what your forebears established. That is why Jesus uses that very relationship to describe our relationship with God. He taught us to pray, “Our Father.”

The obedience is far more important than the work done. We live in a world that values accomplishment and hard work. When I do premarital counseling and ask people how they want others to see them, their number one answer is “hard-working.” My wife can tell you that if I am sitting around doing nothing and she comes near, my instant reaction is to stop and try to look like I am doing something good. That is from how I tried to look good to my parents. So we equate hard work and doing things to being good, to being closer to God.

Look at the Pharisees, the ones Jesus was talking to in Matthew. They were not lazy. They worked hard at being good. Paul speaks in Philippians 3 about how hard he worked to be a good Pharisee. Whatever anyone said about Paul, he would never be called lazy. And the Pharisees were respected by the people because they worked so hard at being good. They had no political or physical power over other people as rulers would have. Their power came from their popularity as people who seemed to do so much to be good.

We are tempted to be that way too. The more I do, the more I am good. The more I earn, the more I deserve. The more I keep busy, the less I can be accused of doing wrong. But is that obedience?

We need to look at Jesus, who spoke the story of the two sons. Jesus did what He was told. He accomplished the mission of going to cross and suffering with our sins. He did everything right and did nothing wrong. But what was behind

that is His obedience to His Father—an obedience that doesn't get things done, but above all that is based on total love for His Father. I think we picture Jesus constantly calculating everything he had to do like a student trying to get all the test answers just right. Certainly He was perfect and did all He was supposed to do. But behind all that was His faith in His Father. Obedience to God is first and foremost to love and trust in Him, not what we do or accomplish. When Jesus pointed out that His enemies were like the first son, He didn't talk about what they should have done, but in Whom they should have believed. "For John (the Baptist) came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." Faith is listening to Jesus, which leads to us loving Him.

Jesus calls on us not just to do what He says, but to trust in Him. That is why He calls us to do things that may not seem like accomplishing much—praying, hearing and studying His Word, going to Holy Communion, spending time with His people, the Church. That involves so often not what we do, but how we stop and listen. Jesus wants not the work He wants us to do as much as He wants us, like how the father wanted his sons more than what they could do.

In our world of getting things done, we often put that ahead of the people God puts in our lives. I attended a pastors' conference where we were told by a pastor who works with congregations in conflict that we are so often focused on fixing problems that we forget about the people involved. What Christ has given us is not the power to fix things, but the forgiveness to restore people to God and then to each other. The real problems so often are the outside issues we fuss over, but the sins in our hearts. What Jesus gives us is the forgiveness to change those hearts. Then even if the bad things remain, the people still have a relationship. In a marriage you can't usually change the differences between a husband and a wife, but forgiveness can restore the relationship which is greater than the differences.

That's why Jesus calls us to obey, not to get things done, but to keep strong the relationship between Him and us and each other. St. Paul said famously in 1 Corinthians, "If I have faith to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." Why we do what we do is more important than what we do. For we are God's children, children who in our hearts can obey.