

“Following Through.”

Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32

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There was a book series first published in 1983 entitled *Joshua: A Parable for Today* written by Joseph F. Girzone. It was a fictional series that presented the author’s creative ideas and imagination of what would happen if Jesus returned in today’s world, not as a conquering king, but rather as he spent his life in Israel 2,100 years ago. Jesus, now going by the name Joshua, wanders through towns and teaches truth to those who are outcast and unloved and some churches embrace him and others want nothing to do with him. Those who want nothing to do with him are very much like the temple leaders found in today’s scripture. They are more interested in their own standing than in hearing the truth. Their words and their actions are not connected. There is no follow through.

Not a fictional Joshua, but the real Jesus in the real world 2,100 years ago, was asked by the real chief priests and elders of his day: “By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?” Jesus answers them by telling a parable. In his parable there is one father and two sons. When the father orders the one son to go to work, he replies, “Forget it, Dad! I’ve got plans, things to do, people to see. Pick your own grapes!” But then, sometime after his father walks away looking rather wounded that his son would talk to him that way, the young man’s conscience gets the better of him. So he changes out of his fancy clothes, puts on his overalls, and heads out to the vineyard. Meanwhile the father has approached his other son and made the same request. “You got it, Dad! I’m on my way!” The father walks away from this exchange feeling good that at least one of his boys knows how to treat him with respect. But then, unbeknown to the father, this boy heads for the gym to spend some time working on his abs and biceps. This son never goes into the vineyard.

“Which son would you rather have?” Jesus asks. “Who really did what his father wanted?” It was an easy answer, as easy for them as it is for us. The first brother did the will of his father, of course. **It was not what either boy said that mattered but what he finally did.** The chief priests and elders give the correct answer, but what Jesus is

getting at is a little less clear to them. So Jesus spells it out for them. There were people in Israel who had for so long been saying “Yes” to God outwardly yet ultimately didn’t follow through. They looked like fine and upstanding people of God. They dressed right . . . said all the right things . . . made all the right promises. But when push came to shove – for example when John the Baptist confronted everyone with his fiery message of repentance – these same people turned away from God. There was no follow through.

First John the Baptist and then Jesus, had suggested that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of God. But they could not bring themselves to do that. People they despised were going into the kingdom ahead of them, Jesus told them, not instead of them, but ahead of them . . . people who may have said “no” at the beginning, but who changed their minds and went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own conviction for obedience to God. Jesus’ parable was just one more story about hypocrisy which has always been the number one charge leveled against religious people.

Hypocrisy? How so, Jesus? What Jesus was meaning here was that from the outside looking in, it surely *looked* like the chief priests were following through on their “Yes” to God. Who followed the law better than they did? Who did more acts of piety and more stringently avoided sin than the Pharisees? How could Jesus compare them to the son who said “Yes” but then didn’t follow through? The entire existence of these folks looked like one giant effort at following through. Yet Jesus seems to indicate that when it came right down to it, they were missing something so fundamental that they could be likened to the duplicitous son who *said* all the right things but who finally failed to *do* what his father wanted.

The simple exposition of Jesus’ parable here applies to the Jews to whom He was speaking. The son who says he will go, but then doesn’t represents God’s people, Israel, and the religious leaders in particular. They claimed to be God’s chosen people, but rejected God’s ways. [We have an example of that in our reading from Exodus chapter 17 where we find God’s people complaining about the manna menu.]

The chief priests didn’t like what they heard! What about us? If Jesus was in the pulpit today and asked us to locate ourselves in the parable, with whom would we identify? Do we tend to identify with the son who flat out says “No” to the Father?

Probably not. We sense that we have said “Yes” to God in one way or another ...probably more than once. God by God’s Spirit has told us to get to work in the vineyard of his kingdom, and we have said “Yes.”

There is a similar dynamic at work in our everyday life. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick friend, even rehearsed what you wanted to say, but then decided on a get-well card instead, thought about what a nice gesture that would be, congratulated yourself on your thoughtfulness, and let it go at that?

If we have any conscience at all, it tears us up to *say* one thing and *do* another. It tears up our families, our friendships, our communities when we say we love but are indifferent, or say the right thing and do the wrong thing. “I will go” and we go nowhere at all. What we believe has no meaning apart from what we do about it. There is no creed or mission statement in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend, or one cup of water held out to someone who is longing for it.

God does not tell us ahead of time . . . or more to the point . . . God has been telling us all along that there is no shortage of people who say, believe, or stand for all the right things. There have always been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God asks them to do. Soren Kierkegaard once wrote: *Jesus wants followers, not admirers*. Whether we *say* “yes” or “no” to Jesus is apparently less important to him than what we actually *do* ...whether we *follow through* or not. The important thing is what our lives say, and they are as easy for most people to read as Jesus’ parable of the two brothers.

Lois, of the comic strip *Hi and Lois* is a real estate agent. She’s showing a house to a couple who can’t make up their minds. They inquire, “You’re the professional – Why do YOU think we should buy this house?” Lois answers, “It has large rooms, a two-car garage, it’s close to shopping, and my daughter needs braces.” Says the wife to her husband: “At last a real estate agent who tells it like it is.”

Jesus’ parable shows that neither son was what you’d call ideal. Even the son that eventually went to work wasn’t exactly a blessing at first; he sassed his dad. I like the Bible’s reality check! Have you ever seen an ideal child? No matter what your interpretation, you have to admire how the Bible never fails to tell us like it is!

One of the most serious sicknesses of any church is what I call “Spectatoritis” – that is, saying “yes” to God each Sunday in the pews but then sitting and watching others do most or all of the work. You can be a spectator at Cushwa Stadium or Finch Field, but not in the church. Jesus does not need admirers or cheering fans . . . Jesus needs team players.

I believe there is a growing number of people serving God than before in our church family – and I am delighted! What pastor would not want that kind of positive response from the congregation? It is usually a sign of spiritual health in a church, and I want to affirm this work of God’s Spirit in our midst. I am deeply grateful to God for those who have listened and discerned their sense of calling and ministry and said, “Yes, God, I will go and be part of a team with others to do such and such.” I want to believe there is an energy and excitement about saying “yes” to God in existing and in growing ministry areas . . .and that this is a sign that we are following where God is leading us.

I have one disappointment, however, and let me stress it is not the fault of anyone in particular . . .it is just a trend that I have seen in so many churches . . .call it a touch of “Spectatoritis,” if you will. Another name for it is “the 20/80 principle” . . .meaning that 20% of the membership end up doing 80% of the work in a church. So, as we move forward it is my earnest prayer and desire to see an even greater number of members and friends being released and participating in our many ministries . . . to see a broader range of people serving on committees . . .to see more members and friends of Memorial rolling up their sleeves and getting down to work in this vineyard.

Please understand one thing: I know better than most people that there are many of you who are no longer able to be as active as you would like. You have passed that age. I understand that, but there are just as many people, possibly more, who **are** able and have not yet entered their golden years. In Matthew 9:37 Jesus said: *The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few . . . Pray, therefore, that the Lord will send more laborers to help bring in the harvest.*

There are two ways to respond to today’s gospel lesson: We can be like the chief priests and elders who “talk the talk” but do not “walk the walk” in the Lord’s vineyard. Or, we can realize that the work that awaits us in the vineyard is a harvest that is plentiful

and the laborers are so few. Oftentimes, we will find that we are the answer to our own prayers that God would send more workers to help bring in the harvest.

When we work in the vineyard, we are touching those that others say are untouchable, reaching those that others say are unreachable and helping them to realize that God is calling them to salvation and service in God's kingdom. When we work in God's kingdom we are authentic in our talking and in our walking. We follow through. Our church needs every able-bodied member and friend to say "Yes" to God . . . to discover, develop, and use our spiritual gifts . . . to discern a call to, and be deployed in, ministry to others. All Christians are ministers . . . servants of the Lord . . . all are called to faithfully follow through to the end.

We've talked about the Lord's ministry arena as a vineyard today. Jesus presented two ways to respond to God to work in God's vineyard in his parable of the two sons. But there is a *third way*: that is to say "Yes, Lord, I will go work in your vineyard," and then go do it. The third way is what God desires . . . it is the way of obedience . . . it is the way of humble service and deep commitment to God's kingdom. It is the way of following through on our promises to God.

Many of us said "Yes" to God early in our lives. And therefore we have a choice. Are we going to follow through with what we promised to do? Are we going to remain faithful to the Lord and go where he sends us or are we going to let ourselves get distracted and turn away from God's call on our lives? Are we going to be like the Pharisees or are we going to take the third way. This third way is the son who says yes to his father and then follows through with it.

We have said "Yes" to God. The gospel lesson presents us with at least three questions to reflect on today: Are we going to live the way we said we would when we said "Yes" to God? Are we following through and acting this out here and now? Are we going to follow through with our promise to serve Jesus to the end?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.