

Prophetic Parables

Temple Parables

(1)

The Two Sons

Matthew 21:28-32

“The Divine Principle of the Kingdom”

“Righteousness through repentance”



Matthew 21:28-32

“But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.”



Background

This is the first of three prophetic Temple parables in Matthew 21-22. It is instructive to observe the occasion that gave rise to it – the challenge to our blessed Lord’s authority. It was a time when opposition to the Lord from the Jewish hierarchy was gaining malevolent momentum.

“And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as He was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority? And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And He said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things” (Matt 21:23-27).¹

The Lord responded to the challenge to His authority with a parable. But before we look into the parable itself we need to draw attention to His initial response because it establishes the essential lesson of the parable. Observe that when challenged over His authority, the Lord did not refer to His genealogical credentials as the Messiah, the heavenly approbation pronounced on the banks of the Jordan, His miracles or even point to Himself as the fulfilment of OT prophecy. Any one of these truths let alone their aggregate composes an unassailable case that would silence His detractors. Instead He raised the matter of baptism – specifically, the baptism of John. “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?” Why did He do this? Superficially we may find our answer in the reasoning of the Jews and the conundrum they faced. Their carnal self-righteous hearts caused them to declare – “we cannot tell” – for fear of being condemned by their own words or by those of the people. Had these critics possessed a modicum of spirituality they would have known that John’s demand for righteousness through repentance must be of God, and the way of heaven. This was the sum and substance of John’s baptism: that “John preached before His coming the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel”...“and that they should believe on Him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” (Acts 13:24; 19:4). This was the confession that their carnal hearts could not admit, and it lies at the heart of the parable put to the elders and chief priests. And, it was for this reason that the kingdom was not granted to the nation because it was to be founded upon the principles of repentance and righteousness, which it rejected.

The Parable – Threefold Application

The parable introduces us to a **certain man**, his **vineyard** and his **two sons**. The moral lesson of the parable – righteousness through repentance, has three applications.

1. To the day in which it was delivered by the Lord. It was a solemn rebuke to the self-righteous religious leaders of Israel.

¹ Chapter 13 of Mark records this challenge but omits the parable, which is left for Mathew to record.

2. To every day since the fall. The principle, that man is deemed righteous through repentance, is the abiding moral rule for every dispensation where sins have to be answered.
3. To a future day in regard to the Israelite in relation to national acceptance within the kingdom of God. This prophetic aspect is our principal concern.

The Parable Prophetically

The certain man represents *God* and His vineyard symbolizes the nation of *Israel*. “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His pleasant plant” (Isa 5:7). God redeemed the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage to be His elect nation on earth. “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it” (Ps 80:8).

The man’s two sons, like many in Scripture i.e., Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Isaac and Ishmael present an instructive contrast. They were asked to work in their Father’s vineyard, to tend and further the Father’s possession and their inheritance. Their divergent responses are intended to elucidate the essential lesson of the parable – the moral superiority of righteousness through repentance over self-righteousness and outward piety.

The first son initially disobeys his father’s will but then repents in the way of righteousness. On the one hand he represents those at that time who obeyed the call to repentance and righteousness announced by John the Baptist. On the other hand he represents the faithful remnant of Israelites who, though once part of a disobedient people, repent and obey the will of God and so comply with the moral principle of the kingdom – righteousness through repentance. They set about seeing to the things concerning the nation of Israel and covet their inheritance according to righteousness.

The second son is representative firstly of the Jews of that day who, unlike the repentant publicans and harlots, placed store in their hollow piety and self-righteousness through religion. This second son illustrates the “lip service” that is so typical of pious unbelief. He said without hesitation “I go, sir” but never had any intention of doing so. In this he is no better than the forefathers of Israel, the nation which God saw as a grape in the wilderness and its forefathers as the first stripe of the fig (Hos 9:10). “And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD” (Ex 19:8). Here, as then, it was the boast of unbelief - the bitter root of which is self-righteousness. It blinds to the grace of God and the need for repentance in accordance with His righteousness. Secondly, the second son is representative of that disobedient generation at the time of the parable, and of today and of tomorrow until the Second Advent. They adhere stubbornly to their rejection of the principle of righteousness through repentance and remain part of the generation of unbelief. This disobedient generation will exist right through to the Lord’s Second Advent. “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt 24:34).

In this first of three prophetic Temple parables in Matthew 21-22, the divine principle needed to enter the kingdom of God is brought out and affirmed – righteousness through repentance. The contrasting responses to it are seen in the two sons and in those whom they represent – the faithful remnant and the generation of unbelief.