

Where are the Real Christians?

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Two sisters had been living in different cities. They came home on a visit. While away from home one of the girls had accepted Christ and became a Christian. After a few days the other girl said "I don't know what causes it., but you are a great deal easier to live with than you used to be." When Jesus comes in it should make a difference. Dr. and Mrs. Paul James of Atlanta have a little boy, Edward. Five or six years ago, next door to their home in Atlanta lives another Christian family with a boy Edward's age. One day play developed into a misunderstanding. The quarrel between the boys was warm and long. Suddenly little Edward drew himself up and said "its time one of us acted like a Christian." How about you? We are living a gospel a chapter each day. By deeds that we do, by words that we say. Men read what we live, whether faithless or true. Say what is the Gospel according to you. Today's Gospel text raises a thought that isn't comforting. In fact it's a troubling thought. It disturbs me personally as a Christian. But it also disturbs me as one who is called to be a pastor in the church. In this Gospel Jesus is telling a story. It is one of those clever stories scripture scholars have labeled a parable. A parable is tricky. It means to be, that's what it is for. A parable, if we let it work will shock us into seeing our life in a whole new light. A preaching teacher wrote a book about Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Matthew and called the book, the Book of Divine Trap.

The tasty bait in the divine trap is the story told about someone else. We sniff and follow the bait, then BAM! The trap springs. We discover that the story is not about someone else, but about ourselves.

So what is the bait here? Jesus begins: So what do you think? What is your opinion? Come on in He says. Enter into this. A man had two sons and he said to them both; go work in the vineyard. The first refused. He said, "No, I won't." But later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the other son and said the same thing. "Yes, sir" he answered. Now if a parent, if the vineyard owner in the story is the Maker of heaven and earth, and we are the children, which one are you? If the shoe fits, put it on. If the shoe pinches, it's the right one. It is meant to pinch, for the sake of revealing the truth about us. In today's Gospel reading Jesus made no bones about applying this parable directly to those to whom He was telling it. Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem, the capital city. He was not in the streets, He was teaching in the temple. His audience was made up of those you would be sure to find in the temple, the good religious folk and their leaders. He was speaking to you and me, at least that's what we would like to think, or is it? For what He said is that those who were out extorting money from other people, those who were out selling their bodies in the streets would get into the kingdom before the hearers of this parable would. This is what led me to the troubling thought. Perhaps the real Christians are out there in the world; not here in the church building. Of the two sons sent out to work, which one actually did the will of the parent? Isn't it the one who said no, but did yes? This parable is a warning to those of us who say yes.

You have experienced, I'm sure, in your travel or just being around and you meet someone and the question comes up. Are you a Christian and every time someone asks you that question it makes you think for a while. To be Christian means I belong to a select group, set aside. Am I a Christian? Oh, I have been baptized, my baptismal certificate, signed by my pastor so-so is framed on my wall. Not only have I been baptized, but I go to church almost every Sunday.

But today's Gospel suggests that's not what it's all about. It takes more than being baptized and being a card-carrying church member to be a Christian. It is about something else. What is it? The parable implies that it's not those who say to God who find life, but those who actually in their lives, do God's will. Not verbal assets, but obedience is what counts. What makes a difference is not only what we do on Sunday, but what we do Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday>>>>> This emphasis on obedience was passion with Christ. By their fruits you will know them. Jesus said, "Not those who say Lord, Lord; but those who do the will of My heavenly Father will enter into the Kingdom of heaven. After all the teaching that Matthew gathered into the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says for who hears the teaching and didn't act on them is like building on a rock." So what determines a real Christian is not what we say, but what we do. Is that it? It's tempting to reduce today's Gospel parable to "Actions speak louder than words", but there's more to it than that. There is the matter of repentance. It may escape our first notice, but the child who actually fulfilled his parent's will, will be the one who repents. The one who said no, but then thought better is the one that Jesus commends to us, the one who Jesus identifies the good religious folks in the temple as those who have not repented.

What does it mean to repent? Perhaps the best image is that of the first child in the story. He was walking away from work in the vineyard, but turned around and walked back in the other direction. To repent is to realize that we have to change and to actually change. To repent is to recognize that there are places in life where we have to change our direction or we will become destructive of ourselves and others. The one who fulfills God's will is the one who repents. Like the son in the story who realized that his NO was wrong, thought better of it, turned around and said yes. But there is one more thing, the time to turn is now. Ezekiel proclaims that what matters is not what the mother and father has done, but what we do. Whatever we have done or failed to do in our lives up to now is of no account, only the present matters. It is said that a minister dreamed he was hitched to a covered wagon, and was laboriously, but slowly pulling it along, until he reached a place in the road where the mud seemed to get deeper and it was with much difficulty that he moved the wagon a few inches at a time. He thought it rather peculiar, as the last time he looked back he thought he saw the entire congregation pushing. But the longer and harder he pulled, the more difficult it became to move the wagon. Finally, almost exhausted, he went to the rear to examine the source of the trouble. All the church members had quit pushing. Not only had they quit pushing, but they were sitting in the wagon and were criticizing the pastor for not pulling the church along faster.

The time we are to work is today. We are to work today, because today is when we are needed. We aren't needed in far off yesterday that's passed and gone beyond the reach of our hands.

We aren't needed tomorrow. That has yet to come. We are needed today. Today many of our brothers and sisters are discouraged and despondent. Today so many have lost their vision. Today many are calling out for help. Today our boys and girls gather around us, ready for the making of a new and better world if only faithful to our responsibility. God calls us to work today because today is when we are needed. Then He call us to work today, because it is the only time there is.

It is our one change. All that is necessary in order for us to waste our life is just waste our todays. Today is the time that we are to find God for ourselves. Now is the accepted time and today is the day of salvations. A man had two sons and told them both to go work in the vineyards. The one who said no, then repented and went is the one who actually did the Father's will. Perhaps those who are actually doing God's will aren't those that have said yes. Perhaps the real Christians are out there, in the world; not here in this church building.

Let me ask you, the next time someone inquires of you if you are a Christian, What would you say? Are you? If you have second thoughts about it then God willing you may be closer to God's kingdom that you think. For it may be as Luther has said "that is it happens indeed, it seems to happen consistently in this matter of faith." That the person who thinks he believes finally doesn't believe at all, and the person who thinks he doesn't believe and despairs actually believes most of all.

We have reason to be unsure about ourselves but we need not be unsure about Jesus. Jesus is waiting with open arms on the palms of His hands we may see the marks of the nails. We may see them because whether or not we are turned towards Jesus. Jesus is turned continually towards us and toward all. Thanks be to Jesus. Amen.