Sunday, September 26, 1976
BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR
Matthew 21:28-31

Recently I came across a story of the coronation of Charles II, as King of England. Back in 1660, the anointing of the King was a real full-size ceremony. The King stripped to the waist and was plentifully anointed on the head, the chest, the shoulders, the back, and the elbows. It was the elbows that got my attention. The idea of anointing the elbows is a good one. What is the use of an anointed head, and heart if the elbows have not been oiled, so they can get into motion and do a job?

To be sure, the anointing of the elbow did not "take" with Charles. He was never much on flexing an elbow on a job of work. The familiar couplet about him might well serve as an epitaph --

He never said a foolish thing
And never did a wise one.

The doing was minus! But Charles II was not the only person to be good at saying things and to be weak in the elbow, in the doing. There are many. It is a common complaint. There are lots of people who should have their elbows anointed. They say the right things, they believe the right things, their hearts are in the right place, but they have an arthritis in the elbow. They cannot, or will not, follow through on what they say. They can't tell their heads from their elbows, cannot tell the difference between an idea in the head only and an idea in the elbow. Their ideas are usually good, but they never think of backing them up with the elbow of action.

This was the case with one of the sons in the parable which Jesus told. Before we look at the deeper meaning of this parable and what it has to say to us about heads and elbows, or beliefs and behaviors, let's look at the background and context of the story.

Jesus had been talking and arguing with the Scribes and Pharisees. They were especially critical of him because of his association with sinners and with unbelievers — people who had the wrong ideas and beliefs about God. They were certain they were the ones who were doing God's will. Furthermore, some of these sinners and unbelievers had become followers and close associates of Jesus.

Now there were questions as to whether these recent converts had the right beliefs. Did they have enough Biblical knowledge? Did they know all the laws and rules of religion?

So it was that Jesus told this parable in answer to the complaints and criticisms of the good church people of the time. Invited to pass judgment on this simple and seemingly harmless story, the Scribes and Pharisees found that the story backfired, and they were caught in its trap.

The parable has that quality about it. Jesus asks: "What do you think? We give our answer and then we find that we are the ones who are caught in its trap. This is what happened to the Scribes and Pharisees for before they knew quite what they were saying, they were admitting that penitent sinners of all kinds, prostitutes and tax-collectors included, were nearer to God's grace than profes-sing church members who often talk a good game, who often believe the

right things in their heads, say the right words and talk a lot about following God's will, but in reality ignore his call.

Thus, it is that the parable has a time of timeless quality about it, and we may find that we too get caught in its trap.

This is a parable of judgment and a parable of good news. It contrasts believing and behaving, saying and doing--heads and elbows.

I. First, let's look at the judgment side of the story. It's a parable of judgment because it tells us that God is much more interested in our actions, in our behavior, in what we really do, than in our promises, our nice words and right beliefs. Remember the first son in the parable had said that he would not work in the vineyard, but then later changed his mind and did so anyway, whereas the second son, said the right thing, made his promise but then did nothing about it. He lived on in his old ways.

To put it another way, God is not so much interested in how many promises we make, or how many holy vows we take, or whether we use the right words in our prayers, or how pious we look — God wants to see how we work it out in our everyday living.

In fact, this was typical of Jesus throughout his ministry. He was a man of action who demanded action on the part of those who wanted to follow him. He was a man who used verbs. To his disciples he said, "Come, follow me!" He didn't first teach them theology. They learned their theology in practice, in action. To the woman caught in adultery, he said, "God and sin no more." He didn't first say, "look it's all a matter of your not having the right attitude." To the rich man who came to him and wanted to know what he must do to find life, Jesus said, "Go, sell what you have and GIVE to the poor, and then come and follow me." To the man who was crippled, he said, "Take up your pallet and walk," He didn't say, first let's think some nice positive thoughts and then we'll worry about walking again. In every instance, Jesus demanded a change in behavior. Jesus wasn't concerned very much about right beliefs or correct theology. He knew that these would follow in course once the action was taken.

Here is where this parable then becomes a parable of judgment. For if we're honest with ourselves, we often have to admit that many of us who are in the church are quite like the second son in the parable, rather than the first. We say to God and our fellowman in many ways and many things, "I'll go, sir." But then we do not go. Our belief and our behavior, our saying and our doing are two quite different things.

Let's be very specific about this. Think of the many times we say that we really have no prejudice, that we love and respect all people of all kinds and varieties, that we believe that as Christians we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We make all sorts of pious announcements and promises with words. But then when the showdown comes, when we are asked to work or live next door with someone of another race, we find all sorts of ways to excuse ourselves and our lack of action.

Or again, think of the many solemn promises made at the time of confirmation or when we joined the church. We then said to God, "I'll work in the vineyard, but often like the second son in the parable, we have not really gone to work at all.

And think of those many informal vows we make from time to time. We narrowly escape an accident, and we say that we'll certainly change our ways and we do not. Or something good

happens to us and we make a promise that we are going to do something in response and that too is often forgotten.

In these and in many other ways the parable judges us. It judges us when we think of all our high resolves and our intentions of making a fine beginning. But the parable is saying that God is interested in our follow through. The second son in the parable made a good beginning. He said, “Yes, father, I’ll work in the vineyard. But a good beginning in words never implies automatically a good ending in behavior. The qualities that enable a man to start or say he is going to start are not the same as those which enable him to carry on well unto the end.

Yes, this is at first a parable of judgment, of judgment on our religion of words. Like the second son, we are not insincere; we have the best of intentions; try to have the WQ right beliefs. The second son in the parable really be-lieved that he was going to work in the vineyard. He wasn’t trying to trick his father. He just kept putting it off. And that is often our case. We really intend to act on our promises, to carry them out. We really intend to love our brother no matter who he is. Just give us time. Today is too soon. We have to work it all out in our minds. We have to get the right attitude. That’s what we tell ourselves.

Someone has said, “there are halls of fame for people who excel in many things. If there were one for those who excel in good intentions, who of us could escape serious consideration for it?”

The longest, costliest step in the process of maturity is from dream to deed, from promise to action, from saying to doing, from belief to behavior. As Eliza Doolittle sings in MY FAIR LADY, “words, words, words, I’m so sick of words--if you’re in love, show me!”

Thus, in this parable as in a number of other places, Jesus tells us that there are going to be some surprises one day when we discover who has entered the Kingdom of God. Some of the very people we thought were the worst may enter ahead of us. Remember in this case, after he had finished the parable, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.”

We are reminded to be careful about how we treat and look at the so-called outcasts of our own society. So often we hear Christians saying such things as, “We’re spending too much money and time on the bums and other such people. Let them stay in the gutter. That’s where they belong.” But we forget it is precisely such persons that Jesus came to save, and he calls us to join him in his work. The parable says that in spite of their rebellion and defiance, they may do God’s will more than us. Be careful, such people may well be in the Kingdom of God exe before us.

II. However, besides being a parable of judgment, this is also a parable of good news.

Remember the first son in the parable at first rebelled against his father, but then later repented and went to work anyway.

Jesus is saying here among other things, that rebellion is itself is not what God finally judges us by. This is good news because all of us at one time or another rebel and are defiant. Most of us have in a sense cursed God. We have said that we are not going to do something and then later have changed our minds and have done it. God understands such actions and accepts us in our rebellion.

As the father in the parable, God also knows that much of our rebellion is basically a part of our affirming our own individuality; it is a part of our finding ourselves; a part of becoming an individual person separate and distinct from all other persons. God is not upset by our rebellions; he rather expects them. What God is concerned about is our behavior after our rebellion.

Again, remember in the parable, that both sons were addressed, both summoned, both commanded. One made the obvious response of obedience without a hint of resentment or defiance, and then didn't go. He was really a very weak individual. He really didn't take his father or himself very seriously.

The other son responded with a challenge, a retort, a refusal. But his was a gesture of individuality. And this son also was taking his father very seriously, seriously enough to challenge him. The son was also in effect saying-- "Father, I do not obey automatically like a thing or a machine. I am a person, a separate person." Once having established that, he chose to do his father's will.

We have talked about this before in other sermons — the fact that this affirming of our individuality, of trying to find ourselves begins at a very early age. It begins physically when we are separated from our mother at birth and become a separate entity in the world. And it continues through life.

Thus, we're all familiar with the child who says, "I won't!" when you tell him to brush his teeth and then he proceeds to brush them secretly. In a sense the child is saying-- "Dad, that's your idea. When I brush my teeth, it's going to be my idea," even though that idea and action agrees with that of his father. In this gesture of defiance, the child affirms both the father's reality as a person, a person to whom he can say no or yes. And the child affirms his own reality. And thus, having affirmed his individuality, he can go on and still do his father's will, only now on a new basis.

You see, sometimes after such a rebellion, after W8 hav8 in a sense fought it out, then we in reality commit ourselves to that action on a new basis. The first son in the parable went to work in the vineyard not only because he was asked to do so, but because he had now made a decision on his own to do so. He rebelled and then repented. The second son also rebelled, but without really knowing it. And because he didn't know it, he couldn't repent and change his ways, and thus his behavior remained the same. There was no change.

Another note needs to be added lest we be misled. The Bible also reminds us that there is a limit to our rebellions, and we need to know the limits. You may have heard about the little girl who kept walking past a neighbor's house pushing her baby carriage. The first time the neighbor said, "Hello." The second time around he said, "Oh, you're back again." The third time around the man's curiosity got the best of him and he asked her, "What are you doing?" "I'm running away," the little girl replied. "But," said the man, "You just seem to be going around the block, around and around and around." "Yes, I know," said the little girl, "I'm not allowed to cross the street." The girl was rebelling, yet she knew the limits of her rebellion.

So it is that the parable is saying that God does not finally judge us by our little rebellions or our big ones, and particularly God does not judge us by what we say, by our promises and statements in words. God judges us by what our subsequent actions are. God is not interested in what we say we are going to do. God is interested in what we do and how we do it.