



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – August 24, 2008

The Two Mirrors

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## Matthew 21:28-32

<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup>He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Have you ever wondered what it was like to sit with Jesus as he taught his first followers? Have you ever pondered what it was like as the Spirit poured through Jesus as he taught? Would you like me to show you this morning?

Well, actually a demo like that is a bit over my pay grade, isn't it? I can tell you what Jesus taught. I can even tell you how Jesus' followers described his presence. But impersonate the Big Guy? That's beyond my reach.

Jesus was never simply a messenger delivering information, he was always the very word of God made flesh. His listeners were never just responding to the logic of his teaching, they were always also grasped by the curious, dynamic way his words stirred up their souls. And, as well-read and well-rested as I may be after my sabbatical, that's still over the head of this local church pastor.

But here's the thing. Jesus left us a way of experiencing the power of his teaching that doesn't depend on the meager gifts of local preachers. Jesus left us his parables.

Scholar Mark Link has written that Jesus' parables can be divided roughly into what might be called "window" parables and "mirror" parables. [Mark

Link, S.J., Experiencing Jesus]. Take for instance Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God. "Window" parables are parables that you can "see through." That is, they are word pictures allowing Jesus' listeners to see from this world of mundane physicality into the mysteries of God's spiritual realm.

You and I are blessed with five senses exquisitely tuned for engaging the physical world in which we're bound, but these same senses are virtually blind to the Spiritual world pressing in on us from all sides. Jesus' "window" parables take the simple images of our mundane world and shape a "window" through which we can gain a glimpse of that Spiritual realm.

For instance, the simple image of a gentle shepherd rejoicing over finding his one lost sheep gives us a window through which to see how deeply our Creator rejoices when just one of us repents and regains God's presence. [Luke 15:3-7]. Or the simple image of a merchant rushing off to sell all his belongings so he might purchase the one precious pearl he'd found gives us a window through which to see how infinitely valuable God's spiritual realm is to those who find it. [Matthew 13:45.]

Imagine how wonderful it must have been to sit at Jesus' feet as he taught a "window parable": the very Spirit of God piercing the veil of God's realm with homey images that seize our hearts and fire our imaginations.

Mirror parables, on the other hand, are stories that "hold up a mirror" to their listeners. They are stories into which you look and see yourself. They are "word mirrors" that provide a picture of how things with you really are - as distinct from how you like to think things are.

Sometimes we nod patiently as we listen to these parables as if they were just colorful little stories designed to communicate ideas to illiterate Galilean villagers. But Jesus didn't craft "mirror" parables to

convey information at all. Jesus crafted “mirror” parables to make something happen inside us as we listen. “Mirror” parables agitate, unnerve, make us squirm with the shock of recognition. They get our feet moving toward change, toward repentance.

I'm not so sure we would rush to buy Jesus tickets on Mirror Parable Day. If you are sure you would want the ticket, then think again about your bathroom mirror in the midst of one of your New Year's resolution fitness projects.

You know the drill. You get all fired up about a new conditioning program; you run out and buy the book; you settle down with a bottle of newly purchased spring water and read all about it. The next morning you throw on your exercise clothes and pause before the mirror before heading out. But your mirror doesn't care a wit that you've been reading about healthier living, or talking about healthier living, or even planning on healthier living. Your mirror just remorselessly reflects the image of you as you actually are.

Today's parable, the parable of the two sons, is one of Jesus' mirror parables, and its function is to reflect back the image of us as we actually are. On the face of it, the parable is simplicity itself. God, our father, had two sons: one was a model of respect and piety, the other was a model of disrespect and impudence. When the father asked each son to work in the vineyard that day, the respectful son promptly and dutifully answered, “I go Lord.” There was just one catch: the pious son didn't ever lift a finger to actually do the work requested.

The disrespectful son's answer was as curt and boorish as the respectful son's answer was pious. “I will not!” He sang out. No: “lord”, no: “sir”, no excuse. Not even a “right after the next commercial, Dad.” Just, “I will not.” But then the disrespectful son had a change of heart, a change of mind, and he finally got his feet moving out the door and into the field to do the work.

Then Jesus popped the simple question: “Which of the two [sons] **did** the will of his father?” The point was obvious, and even the Pharisees promptly answered: the son who had been disrespectful at first but then obedient in the end. The application? The

really obedient among the Jews were not the religious rulers who diligently read, prayed, and sang about doing the will of God but rather the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes who, in the end, actually did the will of God. These will enter God's Kingdom before the high and mighty.

If you are like me, the parable doesn't really take on bite, doesn't really move me as the listener, until I place it back into the context of Matthew's Gospel, until I look more closely into the mirrors Jesus holds up. When you see who stands in the mirror next to the respectful son and who stands in the mirror next to the disrespectful son, the parable opens two separate visions. The story of the respectful son, the story of the pious son who talks a big game but then actually declines to do the father's bidding, opens a vision of clear-eyed judgment. The story of the disrespectful son, the story of the impudent son who scandalously rejects the father's request but then repents and actually performs the will of the father opens a vision of unlimited grace, redemption, and hope.

Who does the mirror reflect standing next to the respectful son, the son who ultimately failed to do the father's bidding? Of course it's the Pharisees themselves, the proper church going folks of their day. But look again at the mirror and see who's standing right next to the Pharisees. It's you and me! The proper church going folks of our day. And, you know, in some ways, these Pharisees look pretty good standing next to us. Do we go to church regularly? The Pharisees went yet more often. Do we study scripture? The Pharisees studied more diligently. Do we refurbish our meeting house? The Pharisees' temple makes our beautiful meeting house look like a rustic lodge. Do we worship and pray and sing praises to the Lord? Only a fraction as often as the Pharisees. Do we mark out the Bible's ethical guidelines for life? We're slackers compared to them.

But Jesus stresses that the essence of God's will is not just about religious good intentions, or religious status, or even pious religious practices so much as a way of being: a way of loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as yourself. Here the Pharisees had fallen short, and of course, so do most of us.

It is not that study, worship, prayer, song, ethics or temple construction are wrong. They too are

commanded by God! But every religious act, every religious ritual, law, or practice is at the same time a potential opening to God's love and a potential snare. A religious practice will be an opening if we humbly let it guide us into the deeper rhythm, the deeper call, the deeper way of being of divine love and mercy, the way of being that draws us into true communion with the God who is love. But the same religious practice will be a snare if we pridefully see it as an end in itself. As we cling anxiously to the practice, we actually lose the God behind it.

"Honey, isn't it great that we went to church this morning! Now we can get back to our self-centered lives until next Sunday."

Walter Burghart has written that the Pharisees had done everything God had asked . . . "Everything - save one thing. Everything - save the most significant thing. I mean what Jesus said to the Pharisees: 'Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'" [Mt. 9:13; cf. Hos 6:6]. Of course the sacrifices in the temple were important; God Himself had prescribed them. But when the [Pharisees] burnt offerings took precedence over burning indignation at injustice, when temple observance kept them from embracing the fatherless and welcoming the stranger, from defending the downtrodden and protecting the poor, then their sacrifices became an "abomination to the Lord." [cf. Isa 1:11-17].

Turn now from this first mirror reflecting a scene of judgment and condemnation to the second mirror reflecting the redemption of the disrespectful son, the son who at first refused but then actually did the will of the father. Who stands next to the disrespectful son in the mirror? Jesus tells us it's those sin-stained tax collectors and prostitutes who had heeded John the Baptist's message. It's the bedraggled laggards in the religious parade who had turned their lives around to actually reach out to other stragglers with love and forgiveness.

But, again, there's plenty of room left in the mirror for you and for me. If we have fallen short of God's image, if we have too often confused churchy means with divine ends, if we have inadequately loved God and neighbor, our record is almost certainly better than the tax collector's and harlot's records had been at first.

Tax collectors in Israel weren't simply IRS men. They were Jewish traitors who sold out to the occupying Romans. They were agents of Roman oppression who cheated their fellow Jews in the bargain.

The prostitutes weren't simply a misguided little band of Julia Robertses struggling on the streets in "Pretty Woman." They were shunned women who broke divine laws by the fistful and were universally despised for bringing shame and punishment on the entire Jewish nation.

And yet . . . And yet Jesus tells us these loathed tax collectors and prostitutes will march into God's spiritual realm in the places of honor, at the head of the procession. Yes, they had disobeyed God's word, and yes their professions had debased them; but they had shown sorrow and repentance. As Jesus said, they had "changed their minds". More than that, their faces fairly glowed with astonished gratitude for God's forgiveness and grace. They walk out the door to serve in God's vineyard not with a sense of grudging burden but with a sense of thanksgiving for the fresh start.

Oh, they might not know scripture like the Pharisees, or the forms of prayer or worship like the Pharisees, but when God called they eventually got their feet moving as best they could and marched out the door to spread the love they had experienced first hand.

Jesus tells this story to make sure you and I know there is still room in the redemption mirror for you and for me. Still time to join the joyous procession into the Kingdom.

Every time you encounter this parable, God calls to you, "Child, go and work in the vineyard **today**." Are there doctrines of the faith you still don't understand? Don't stall while you study. God calls you into the vineyard today. If you understand only the commandment to love, then get your feet moving and love as well as you can. God will teach you what you need to know about the faith in your encounters with the ones you serve.

Is your prayer life incomplete? Don't tarry to perfect your spiritual disciplines. God calls you into the vineyard today. Serving God's children is the royal highway to experiencing God's presence first hand.

Is your worship life irregular? God seeks no greater praise than a heart warmed with love for the hungry, the poor and the imprisoned. But God seeks that warmed heart today.

If we hear God's voice calling, "Child go and work in the vineyard today", then we have got to get our feet moving into the field as best we can. Paul writes, "**Today** if you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts." [Hebrews 4:7] "Behold, **now** is the acceptable time; behold, **now** is the day of salvation." [II Corinthians 6:2] **Amen.**