

WHAT KIND OF CHILD PLEASES HIS FATHER?

Text: Matthew 21:28-32

I don't think I'd like to be the brother of a President. How would you like to be Billy Carter, or Roger Clinton, or one of Barack Obama's long-lost brothers? No matter how successful you were at your job, people would always be comparing you to your more famous brother. Couldn't you hear your mom saying, "Why can't you be more like your brother? What's wrong with you, he already got elected president?"

Maybe you were an only child and didn't have to compete with a brother or sister, but for many of us sibling rivalry was and is real. Who's got a bigger house? Who's got more kids? Who's the doctor in the family, and who's the auto mechanic? Most parents try not to make it so obvious, but they can't help comparing their kids to each other.

I was the oldest in my family, and could do no wrong, where my brother was the black sheep. What do you do when you're in that position, and it seems that you're always letting your parents down? Well, that's the position we find ourselves in with God. None of us comes even close to measuring up to our big brother, Jesus Christ. He did everything right where we do everything wrong, and yet you never hear God getting down on us and saying, "Why can't you be more like your brother?" No, it's because Jesus pleased his father in every way that you and I can call ourselves the sons and daughters of God. Even though we let him down every day, because of Jesus we keep trying to please our heavenly father. We want to be children who listen with both ears. And we want to be children who work with both hands.

1. A child who listens with both ears

Today Jesus us tells a story about a rivalry between two brothers. One of them seemed like a good son. The other didn't even try to keep up appearances. When the father asks him to go out and work in the vineyard, this second son says, "I will not!" How's that for a reply? I know what would happen next if one of my kids said that to me. This son didn't offer any excuses why he couldn't work. He could have at least pretended he didn't hear his father – you know how that works, don't you? "Huh? Did you say something, dad? I wasn't listening." No, this boy just plain refused to obey.

Let's compare him to the so-called "good" son. He knows that his brother's been sassy, and he can use this to his advantage. So when his father asks him to go work in the vineyard, the boy solemnly promises, "I will." And to make it sound even more convincing he even adds "sir." But then what does he do? Nothing. His father's words go in one ear and right out the other. We've all seen this in our own children. Their mouths may be saying, "Yeah, mom and dad, um-hmm, whatever you say," but we know their brains are in the next county.

In the same way, some people make it pretty obvious that they don't want to listen to God's orders, like the "tax collectors and prostitutes" of Jesus' time, like the gays and lesbians, the tattooed bikers and party animals of today. But with others, it may not be so obvious. The Pharisees of Jesus' day put on a good show of listening to God's commandments, but they didn't listen to John the Baptist or to Jesus call for repentance. We don't look like such bad guys either, but what's going on inside? This story is about us. Every time God lays down an order our sinful nature throws a temper tantrum. You and I do not want God telling us that we've got to sacrifice more for him, that we've got to stop blowing so much of our time and money on ourselves, and start doing the work he wants us to do. We conveniently "forget" that God has given us our health, our wealth, our children and that he can take it all away from us in an instant. The words of the great commission, "Go, and make disciples of all nations" go in one ear and out the other.

Later on the first son changes his mind. What happened? He realizes how rude he's been to his father, and he's sorry about it. This is father who gives him his 3 squares a day, who puts a roof over his head and clothes on his back, and doesn't charge him anything for it. And he realizes that in spite of his track record, because this isn't the first time he's lipped o, his father still wants him to work. This is a picture of repentance, isn't it? Repentance starts with listening to God with both ears, realizing that God's law hits all of us squarely between the eyes. And this isn't a one-time event. Martin Luther said that the Christian's life is one of daily repentance. That's because we sin every day. But that's not where repentance ends. Repentance also includes faith, faith that God still loves us in spite of our track record. Faith in Jesus, who listened to his father with both ears to forgive the times you and I have pretended we don't hear him. When wax builds up in our ears, we've

got to flush it out so we can hear. Through repentance we not only hear better about our sins, but we also hear better about our Savior.

2. A child who works with both hands

If I had a dollar for every time one of my kids tattled on the other, I'd be a rich man by now. That's human nature, always dishing the dirt on someone else to make yourself look better. You and I may not have fallen into the disgusting sins of others in our society have committed, but we've got nothing to brag about before God. The first son in Jesus' parable was a jerk, actively rebelling against his father. But the second son wasn't any better – he still didn't do what his father wanted.

Which of them was worse off? Well, let me ask you this: what's more dangerous, knowing that you've got a full-blown case of cancer, or having a cancer secretly growing inside of you? While I don't think we'd like to be in either situation, at least you could seek treatment if you were aware of your cancer. All people have the cancer of sin growing inside of them. Only fools ignore it, like the Pharisees who thought they were serving God but were fooling themselves. They obeyed with their hands but not their hearts. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Just calling yourself "Christian" or "Lutheran" doesn't make you one.

If you and I want to work for God, then we need to work with both hands and heart, realizing that even our best work is shoddy. I can show my kids how to prepare a surface for painting, to scrape off the old paint and tape the woodwork and to dip the paint roller in the pan, but I'll end up working twice as hard fixing all the mistakes they make. But here's the thing about God – he wants imperfect workers, because Jesus has fixed everything. Matthew, the author of the Gospel we're looking at today, was one of those imperfect workers, he was a tax collector, a man who had abused his authority to cheat and steal from others, but who Jesus called to his service. The door of heaven was open wide for him and other so-called "sinners," but it was sealed tightly shut to the self-righteous Pharisees, who thought so highly of the work they were doing for God.

Dear friends, what kind of work are we doing for God here at Lamb of God? We give the appearance of being "good sons and daughters," as we meet here for worship, as we support our church with our time and treasure, but how much of our heart is invested in doing God's work? Does this church exist for our own enjoyment, so that we have a place to sing our favorite hymns and meet our friends and get our weekly shot of religion? What about all those new people moving into our community – many of them have never called themselves members of a church anywhere. We may consider ourselves good little boys and girls, but serving God with both hands means doing more than just staying out of trouble. It means we bend over backwards for "sinners." Serving God with both hands means we make God's work more important than our own. Serving God with both hands means giving up a Saturday morning for an outreach event. Serving God with both hands means exploring alternative kinds of worship, it means being open to change for the sake of others. And above all, serving God with both hands depends on Jesus' perfect work to get us to heaven. Because of Jesus, we all please our heavenly father. We don't have to compete with anyone. AMEN.