

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. (*1st Timothy 1:2*)

"Promises, promises, all I ever get is promises!"

This familiar expression aptly describes one of the two young men in the parable serving as today's text. The second son in the example of Jesus was quick to make promises, but rates a zero on follow-through and fulfillment. He was polite and proper in his words to his father, but he did nothing. There was no action to match his nice words. He is a perfect illustration of the truth that promises are not enough.

Note that Jesus was addressing the chief Priests and elders in the Temple in Jerusalem. He had driven the merchants and money changers out of there just the day before. The religious leaders had just challenged His authority to speak and act as He did. Now Jesus begins a series of parables -- earthly stories with Heavenly meanings --- to get His point across.

The sons referred to in our text had a lot of real-life company among the leaders of Israel. That is why Jesus used this parable about these two brothers. The priests and the elders talked very politely and properly about religion and life. They were long on promises, but short on obedience. For that reason Jesus repeatedly took them to task. Later in Matthew's account (23:3) Jesus is quoted as saying of the scribes and Pharisees: "...they do not practice what they preach."

It so happened that the priests and elders who were in Jesus' audience in the temple --- as He spoke the parable of our text --- were also men of political clout. At that point in history, there was no separation between the government of Israel and its established religion. Some of the religious leaders were also running the government and operating the courts --- under the watchful eye and supervision of the Romans, of course. They had positions of power and influence in both the spiritual and political realm.

Offhand, we might say it is different in our land today. After all, we make a big deal about the distinction between church and state these days. Each has its own set of officers. Yet, this separation between the religious and the political in the United States is not as sharp and complete as we once believe it to be.

We like to think of our national leaders as those who give moral tone to our nation. Our culture claims to be religious. We put slogans about trusting in God on our currency. We mention God in our pledge of allegiance. Politicians sprinkle their speeches with references to God (being careful not to mention Jesus Christ!).

Our civil religion in America is a mix of references to righteousness, the work ethic, cleanliness, thrift, and "god" (in an intentionally generic sense). Back in 1973, the United States Secretary of the Treasury actually identified "that old-time religion" as "balance the budget."

BUT: Our hodgepodge of piety and morality is not yet the Christian religion, which calls for repentance --- and faith in Jesus Christ.

Even so, we come very close to thinking of the United States as the chosen nation of God, and most of us would like to believe that our civic leaders are men and women of virtue on whom God must be smiling and whose example we can imitate.

However, through the years our confidence in our leaders has been shaken. We have found that we can have a civil religion that proclaims a deity --- however generic --- without calling for

repentance. We have found that we can have civil leaders who proclaim a deity --- however generic --- and demonstrate a morality that is totally unacceptable to the one true God.

First-century Israel had a problem with leaders who were not as pious as they appeared to be. We seem to have the same problem in our day. Because of the underhanded, sneaky, immoral, and dishonest activities of some of our elected officials, many have come to view our government with contempt and disdain. We recognize a disease similar to the insincerity that afflicted men in high places in Jesus' day.

It really should not be disillusioning to us if we find a veneer of piety --- instead of penitence --- among leaders of both church and state today. Satan seems to work the hardest on those who have been named to high office. Nevertheless, it does surprise us when a respected church or civic leader is caught leading a double life.

Unfortunately, things like that have been going on, and --- while the frequency and persistency of such scandals do not make them any more tolerable --- Jesus was dealing with disgraceful conditions, and shameful situations not wholly different from those of today. That should help us to get our spiritual sight in focus.

We cannot control the moral fiber of those who sit in leadership positions, but we do have jurisdiction over our own lives --- and that is why today's text has a message for us. It has relevance for all of us nearly 2000 years after it was spoken, because it is a pointed call to personal repentance for every individual.

It is an abuse and misuse of our text to give the impression that it takes an easy attitude toward sin or disrespectful behavior. It is wrong to say that --- with its commendation of the young son --- who at one point sassed his father --- this parable condones impoliteness and discourtesy.

The Bible admonishes us to be "courteous at all times" (1st Peter 3:8). Jesus did not compliment the first son's disrespectful tongue, but rather his change of heart. The ideal child of God is not one who is brazen today and obedient tomorrow. A mature Christian is courteous and polite, obedient and productive, both today and tomorrow.

Furthermore, in using the dregs of society as examples of people who will go into God's kingdom ahead of the priests and elders, Jesus did not mean to say: "Go ahead, sow your wild oats. That will be okay --- as long as you repent sometime before you die."

NO!

What Jesus is stating is the fact that many people with an unsavory background do get into His kingdom because they come clean in their repentance. The sinners of yesterday and today do not try to justify their earlier conduct. They deplore their pasts.

Once they come to faith in Jesus of Nazareth, they are heartbroken over their misspent years. They cannot undo those days when they were saying "NO!" to God. They can --- and do --- accept the invitation of a Savior who says: "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

They are the ones who find Jesus to be the One who took their place under the law to redeem them. They are the ones who receive adoption as sons and daughters of God. Once that truth dawns on them, they cling to that Savior for dear life. They not only turn away from their sullied and sorry past; they turn to Jesus and walk with Him. Thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, they are new creatures who do "know how to love him", and who do know how to show and share their gratitude. They are both penitent and productive.

As you listen to our text today, perhaps you might be thinking that Jesus should have introduced a third son into the story of our text --- one who would have both promised and performed... one who would have said "yes", and acted accordingly.

Oh, but there is a third Son involved in our text! He is the teller of the parable. He was the one preaching judgment and forgiveness to the people of His day.

Furthermore, He "spoke as one having authority." It is no surprise to us that His contemporaries were sometimes amazed at His authenticity, and the authority with which He spoke. We know that He is the incarnate Son of God, who came not only to preach --- and teach --- and speak parables but --- above all --- to reveal the truth of God's love for all His sons and daughters --- including those who say "NO!"

God so loves us, His wayward children, that He sent His Son to be our brother and, as we read in today's Epistle (Phil 2:8), "being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

That is how much God loves His disobedient sons and daughters. As we begin to appreciate the love that went all the way to Calvary, we pray for the Holy Spirit's strength to show love and obedience to Him --- not only in proper words, but also in how we live and act.

That is what repentance is all about. In repentance, the man is turned from the deadness of his former works to live works of faith.

True penitence will reach to every corner of our lives, including our duties as citizens in a country that is hurting and groaning because of corruption and corrosion in high places. As penitent sinners, we do more than groan, because we are aware of the fact that our heavenly Father expects us to DO something about the situations we can improve.

He is counting on us to be productive.

When we really hear our Lord, we try hard to be responsible and trustworthy citizens, even when sanctimony and irresponsibility are rampant as a way of life. We "shall not follow a multitude to do evil" (Exodus 23:2). More than that, in a land where we say that the government is not only for the people but also of and by the people, we must take seriously our Lord's words about our being a salt, a light, and a leaven. We dare not piously wash our hands of the "dirty business" of politics.

Rather, we recognize the need for persons of integrity to assume and assert leadership. We need to do more than vote. Our choices are limited at the polls. The selection of candidates for public office begins far ahead of the voting booth. Not until more committed and consistent Christians are involved in those selections --- not until more committed and consistent Christians are ready to offer themselves as candidates for public service --- can we expect an improvement in the public affairs of our nation.

To say polite things to and about our government is not enough. To be proper in our conduct in church is not enough. The need today is for obedient sons and daughters of God who know what it means to be both penitent and productive.

Promises are not enough. How do you respond to these words of Jesus to the self-righteous leaders of His day? What difference has our Gospel lesson today made in your life?

What the Lord asks --- in addition to promises --- is performance --- action. Pray that the way we live our lives today will show us to be more than just proper and polite, but penitent --- and productive.

Amen. May the peace of God, which passes all [human] understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen (Philippians 4:7)