

The Second Baptist Pulpit

**“Yes and No”
Matthew 21:23-32
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Do you have trouble saying “no”? Have you ever told someone, *Sure, I can do that*, then right afterwards say to yourself, *There’s no way I can do that*. We’ve probably all said *yes* from time to time when we really should have said *no*.

Back when I was fresh out of seminary I was at a conference at Baylor University that was being put on by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty out of Washington D.C. You remember we have had Brent Walker, who is their

Executive Director and my friend, speak here at our church.

At this conference, we had Dr. Charles Adams as a speaker, who is the pastor of one of the largest African-American Baptist churches in Detroit, Michigan. He has a Ph.D. from Harvard and was supposed to be very prominent and well-known.

After he spoke, I was standing around in the lobby when James Dunn, former head of the Baptist Joint Committee, came out

and said, *Brent, you know your way around Waco. Can you get Dr. Adams to the airport in a hurry? If you hurry he can make his flight; if not, he'll have to spend the night.*

Now, at that time James Dunn was a personal hero and mentor to me. Here he was coming to me asking me to help him out. So, of course I said, *Sure*. He was very grateful.

I said, *Just a second*. And I walked over to someone else out there in the lobby that I knew and I said quietly, *Do you know how to get to the airport?*

I had been there before, but as you may know, I have a hard time finding my way around. I don't have that inner compass that some people have. Well, this person told me how to get to the airport, but I wasn't exactly confident about it. They introduced me to Dr. Adams, and he followed me out to my car. He had Gucci luggage and one of these felt hats like a bowler or fedora.

I cleared off the junk from the front seat of the car and we pulled out of the parking lot. It was then that I noticed that my gas gauge was on empty. So I was having one of these quiet panic attacks, if you know what that's like.

I didn't want him to know that I wasn't real confident about how to get to the airport. And I sure didn't want to tell him we might run out of gas. But the truth was running out of gas and/or getting lost were very real possibilities. Either way, we'd miss the plane.

I never did tell him that I didn't really know how to get there, but I did tell him we were running on empty, just to give him fair warning. Talk about tense the whole way there.

We did finally get there. I was a nervous wreck the whole time. He made his plane. Although he had so much gold to take off before he could make it through the metal detector that he almost didn't make it.

As he left, he told me he had his sermon for Sunday: *Makin' it on Fumes and Faith*.

We get ourselves in some uncomfortable situations sometimes when we can't back up our words. When we say we can do something, but we really may not be able to. When we say *yes* but should have said *no*.

Yes and No and what we really mean is what we're talking about today. We're looking at Matthew 21:23-32.

It is the week before Jesus' death on the cross. He has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Then there was the cleansing of the temple, where Jesus directly challenged the religious leaders of Jerusalem.

Our text then, is set in an atmosphere of tension and controversy. Jesus' adversaries through all this consist of *the chief priests and the elders of the people*. This is basically the equivalent of saying Jesus was butting heads with the local pastors and the deacons.

When Jesus goes into the temple, the religious leaders ask him by what authority he is doing all these things he is doing. That is a legitimate question.

So they go round and round about that for awhile, then Jesus goes on the offensive and tells the chief priests and elders a story.

Tell me what you think of this story, Jesus says. *A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, "Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard."*

The son answered, "I don't want to." But later on he thought better of it and went.

The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, "Sure, I'd be glad to." But he never went.

Which of the two sons did what the father asked?

They said, *The first.*

Let me see if I can update this story to a modern day situation so you can understand a little better.

Suppose a man's wife is leaving town for the weekend and leaving him at home with their two children. Let's just say, hypothetically, she's going to Phoenix to visit her mother. And it just so happens that the man's dad and his wife are coming to visit for the weekend. Let's just say, hypothetically, they are from Dallas.

So before the man's wife leaves to go out of town, she says something like, *There are some things you all need to do before your dad gets here.* And let's just imagine that she doesn't really trust that her husband is listening carefully to these instructions, so she gets out a piece of paper and says, *I'm going to write it down.* And so she writes:

Clean rooms

Make beds

Clean litter box

Wipe down bathroom counters with Windex

And she says, *Can you handle that?*

Yes, he says. But this hypothetical husband knows that he hates making the bed. Mainly because there are about 17 pillows that have to be placed in the proper order and location.

And even as he's saying "yes", let's just imagine in this hypothetical situation, he knows that there is very little chance he will wipe down the counters with Windex. He doesn't even know where the Windex is.

Did he do the will of the wife in this story? He said yes. Is saying "yes" good enough? We'll soon find out.

In Jesus' story, one man said yes and didn't do it. The other said no and did do it. Which of the two sons did what the father asked? Not the one who said yes but did nothing. It was the one who said no but then did what his father told him to do.

Jesus said, *Yes, and I tell you that crooks and prostitutes are going to precede you into God's kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and prosti-*

tutes believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't care enough to change and believe.

Like one of Jesus' most famous parables, there are two sons in this story. The second son was guilty of doing what I have been talking about so far here this morning. He said yes but he didn't back it up. He should have just said no. His father told him to go work in the vineyard, he said, *Sure*, then he ended up not doing it.

Jesus is telling the religious leaders he is in conflict with that they are people whose lips say *Yes*, but their lives say, *No*.

What's another way to say this? Hypocrisy.

They say one thing with their mouths but do the opposite with their actions. Have you ever known anybody like that?

I would rather direct this parable to others. It's not hard to point fingers. The legalists, the Religious Right, the TV evangelists with their religious talk and mansions. But this parable is addressed to us.

In fact, this problem, this hypocrisy, is one of the most common reasons in my experience why people reject Christianity.

Christians profess “family values”, for example, with their lips, but studies show that Christians rent pornographic movies, divorce their spouses, and abuse their children at about the same rate as everybody else.

Someone told me the other day that she saw a car with a fish symbol on it and a bumper sticker that said, *Honk if You Love Jesus*. She was behind this person at a stop light, and so she thought she’d take them up on their bumper sticker, and she honked. The person driving that car responded by extending a hand outside the window and exhibiting the international sign of displeasure. Must have been a stolen car, don’t you think?

Words give one message, actions another. Do your actions match up with your words?

In the book, *Out of Africa*, Isak Dinesen tells the story of a boy named Kitau who appeared at her door and asked to work for her. She agreed, and he proved to be a wonderful servant. Three months later she was dismayed because he asked for a letter of recommendation to work for a Muslim Shiek in another region. She didn’t want to lose him and offered him a large raise, but he was insistent about leaving.

He told her that he was planning to either become a Christian or a Muslim and explained that his purpose in coming to live with her had been to see the behavior of Christians up close. Now he was going to work for the Sheik to observe how Muslims live. After experiencing both, he would make up his mind.

Later she wrote: *I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, “Good God Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here.”*

Any one of us would feel the same way, because so often our words give one message, but our actions give another.

Sure I’ll go, the second son said. But he never went.

The legalism that Jesus’ adversaries-- the chief priests and elders-- had fallen into-- and that many of us Christians fall into-- actually encourages hypocrisy by its very nature because it defines a set of behaviors that can cover up what’s going on inside a person.

At church—some more than others—everyone learns how to look and talk spiritual. So our churches are full of people who are emphasizing externals which

are easy to fake—allowing us to conform even while we suppress or hide inner problems.

The unfortunate truth is that because of our falling into the trap of legalism that Jesus so clearly tried to expose, many, many Christians-- probably a few here today-- are suffering some deep inner turmoil-- depression, addictions, something else that is going unaddressed. You are concentrating instead on conforming to the surface behavior around you. You know, you may be falling apart on the inside, but if you say “God” and “Jesus” enough in conversation you must be OK.

That’s the second son in Jesus’ story.

To the first son the father said, *Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.*

And he answered, *I don’t want to.* But later he changed his mind and went. And he is the one that did the will of his father.

Basically, Jesus is saying to these religious leaders, *Look, you are people who say “yes” with your lips but “no” with your lives. In fact, the very people you condemn the most-- the crooks and prostitutes-- are do-*

ing the will of my Father more than you.

They may have said “No” at one time, but then they believed, and now they are saying “Yes” with their whole lives.

And so Jesus says these crooks and prostitutes will get in to the Kingdom of Heaven. Methodist pastor Nancy Ore makes this observation: *Jesus didn’t say they’d get in because of their behavior. He said they’d get in because they knew they weren’t perfect and knew how desperately they needed God. They knew how much they longed to be in the vineyard...*

It’s not the ones like the Pharisees who are in God’s presence. It’s not the ones who think they know all the right words. It’s not the ones who think they know the religious rules and are rigidly and self-righteously and joylessly living them out.

The folks who get into God’s Kingdom vineyard are the ones who know they’re not perfect. The ones who are afraid, the ones who are hurt, the ones who feel guilt, who agonize over broken relationships... the ones who are sick... and tired. The ones who are acutely aware of their separation from God. Not the ones who think that they are God’s favorite people.

These are the kind of people Jesus is still looking for: People who haven't necessarily always given the right answers or done the right things, but who, at a certain point, truly came to believe and began to say *Yes* to God at crucial moments and at common moments-- not with their lips only, but with their lives.

I'm not even going to tell you how much time I spent yesterday trying to figure out a clever ending for this sermon. But I was frustrated about it. Because really, I think God was trying to get me to stop trying to be clever, stop, for once in my life, trying to come up with the right words.

So we're left a direct and straightforward question for each of us.

Am I a person who says the right things but whose life doesn't measure up?

Or am I a person whose who has made serious mistakes maybe but has come back around and believed and trusted and whose life says *Yes* to God?

A person who maybe didn't get or give the right answer at first, but said yes the second time around and meant it?

But that's a rhetorical question. Don't answer that question with words. Answer it with your life. Yes or no.

Be careful giving a dishonest "yes;" that's when you get yourself into trouble.

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