Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

Jesus often taught his disciples with parables. Parables can make a point clearer by placing the message in the context of a real-life situation. Parables can also be a way to make people do a little self-examination.

Jesus used the parable of the two sons to give the chief priests and the elders an opportunity to look at themselves. Their religiosity needed to be condemned, but Jesus knew they wouldn’t listen to him. So, he gave them a chance to judge themselves. Their call to judge themselves came in Christ’s words: What do you think? (Mt 21:28 NIV). Today we will take a close look at this parable so each of us can see which son we most resemble.

The parable speaks of two very different sons. Two very different types of people. These two types are present in today’s churches just as they were present in the church of Jesus’ day. Some people, like the first son, prove better than their promise. Others, like the second son, promise better than they prove.

Like the two sons, we all have the same Father. We are all children of God. However, like the two sons, we are not all alike. There is as much difference among today’s Christians as there was between the two sons.

Both sons were given the same command: Son, go and work today in the vineyard (Mt 21:28 NIV). God sends all of his children to work in his vineyard. The vineyard we are called to work in is the world. The work we are to do is to spread the Gospel. The time we are to do our work is now. Jesus said: As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work (Jn 9:4 NIV).
We have not been put on this earth to be idle. We are not here to play our lives away. If we are ever going to do something for our Lord, why not do it now? God commands us to work and our work brings three benefits; the church on earth grows, our neighbors are spared an eternity of suffering in hell, and we are blessed with the joy of knowing we are doing the Lord’s bidding.

The response of the two sons was very different. The first son did better than he said. He proved better than his word. His answer to father’s call was bad, but his later actions were good.

The son’s answer to the father’s call to action was an impudent: *I will not* (Mt 21:29 NIV). This is often the answer the Lord hears. Hardhearted sinners often refuse to bend to the Father’s bidding. Often this refusal is offered up without even the slightest blush of embarrassment. Excuses for not heeding God’s call is one thing, but a downright refusal is quite another.

Why would God’s children refuse to do the work he calls them to do? Most often, it is because they are too busy tending to fields of their own planting and they don’t want to take time to tend to God’s vineyard. They are too busy enjoying the business of this world to take time out for the business of God’s kingdom. Consequently, the delights or employments of this world keep them from doing the greater work to which they have been called.

Happily, the first son had a change of heart and mind. The Greek text says the son repented. That means he had such a change of heart and mind that he also had a change of action. God is not as interested in our regret over misdeeds as he is in our change of behavior. If the first son had only been sorry for his answer, no good would have come from his change of heart. However, his remorse led to repentance and his doing his father’s will.

On the other hand, the second son said better than he did. He promised better than he proved. His answer was yes but his action was no.

How proper his answer was: *I will, Sir* (Mt 21:30 NIV) he said. How respectful he was, addressing his father as *Sir*” (Mt 21:30). How easy it is for promises without substance to roll off our lips.

Many people make promises they never keep. Two years from now we will be in the midst of an election year. A great number of promises will be made all the way up to election day, and then forgotten the day after the election. Americans pretty much expect broken political promises – even though it still takes some people by surprise election after election.

Broken promises made to God are another matter. God does not expect broken promises. The religious leaders Jesus was speaking to had made a mockery of
promising to follow God, because their only interest was for themselves. Their mouths sang praises to God, while their hearts turned away from him. Their promise proved to be more than they were willing to sacrifice. Buds and blossoms are not the same as fruit.

So, the question at hand is: *Which of the two did what his father wanted?* (Mt 21:31 NIV) Each of the sons had his faults. One was rude. The other was a liar. The question becomes which of the two was less faulty.

The high priests and elders chose the first son. He was favored because he proved better than his words. His ending was better than his beginning. Their human understanding told them they would rather deal with someone who was better than his promise rather than someone who proved to be less than his promise.

With this parable, Jesus gave those religious leaders the opportunity to judge their own religiosity. His words must have stung their souls: *I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you* (Mt 21:31 NIV). The people who had never cared much about God had accepted the truth of God when it was presented to them. Those who professed to have the truth of God found they couldn’t bring it to reality in their lives because that meant putting God ahead of themselves.

What does all of this say to us? Can this parable apply to 21st century Christians? This parable is a case of good news / bad news.

The warning here goes to the Christians who think that a good show is enough. The world has too many people who call themselves Christians and go no farther than that. Claiming the name will not get you into heaven. God is looking for more than lip service.

Through the prophet Isaiah God warns us about being a name-only Christian. The Lord says: *These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men* (Is 29:13 NIV).

God wants his people not only to praise him with mouths but also praise him with their actions. God expects his people to be witnessing to his love and goodness by sharing with both the saved and the unsaved. God wants us to be sharing the gifts he has given us, the time he has given us, the love he has given us.

The good news here goes to both the saved and the unsaved. If you know the Lord, but you haven’t been very faithful about following the Lord, take heart. Our God is the God of second chances. Like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, God stands waiting for you to return to him. And, like the father in that story, God will welcome you home, embrace you with his love, and set the angels partying up a storm because you have returned.

If you are one who has always resisted the Gospel call, take heart. Our God is the God of second chances. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God speaks a special word of comfort
and promise to you. The Lord says: *If a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him* (Ezek 18:21 NIV).

You can never go too far for God to take you into his fold. At the end of the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus tells what happens when a sinner turns to the Lord: *I tell you ... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent* (Lk 15:7 NIV).

The Tale of Two Sons is for everyone.

To those who are actively working to follow Jesus in word and deed, the parable sends a message to encourage you to keep up the good work.

To those who belong to God but have not been as faithful as they might be, this parable sends a message of hope because God is waiting for you to return.

To those who stand outside the family of God, this parable sends a message of salvation because God will celebrate your turning to him for all eternity.