

## The Third Son

There is a thread that I've noticed throughout the Bible: **two sons**. There are several instances of *two sons* scattered throughout the Bible.

Perhaps I've noticed it because I have two sons. I am also one of two sons (the older, better, smarter, best looking of two sons).

We first see two sons at nearly the beginning of the Book; Caine and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve. Cain did evil, murdering his brother (an *uncharacteristic* case of a *bad* older brother). In a confrontation with the Lord, Cain rhetorically asked:

**“Am I my brother’s keeper?”**<sup>1</sup>

It was a ridiculous response. Cain knew that nothing was out of the sight and knowledge of God; Cain had nowhere to hide. Furthermore, it was a ridiculous response in that the answer is clearly **yes**... yes we are our brother's keeper, and our sister's keeper, and our neighbor's keeper, and even the keeper of strangers in that we have great responsibility for one another... especially in matters of life and death. Life is precious, and we all share responsibility for one another to protect life. Yes, Cain, you should have been your brother's keeper.

There were two sons of Abraham: Ishmael and Isaac. And two sons of Isaac: Esau and Jacob. In both cases God chose to work through the *younger* sons to establish His special People.

Jacob, too, had two sons with his wife Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. And Joseph had two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh. (Seeing the pattern here?)

Moses was brother to Aaron and the pattern continues of brothers, two sons, throughout the Old Testament. Their names, as well as many of their deeds, are recorded for us to read and study.

But today I'd like us to consider a couple of instances of two sons... two sons without names... likely not real people at all, but the stories are important lessons from Jesus.



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<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ge 4:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The first is found in Matthew 21, allow me to read the passage:

<sup>28</sup> “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.’

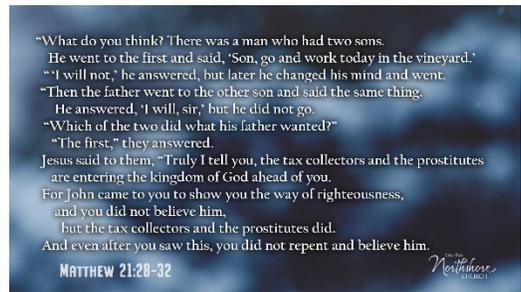
<sup>29</sup> “‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

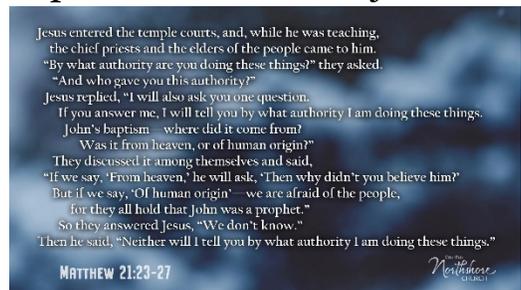
<sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup>



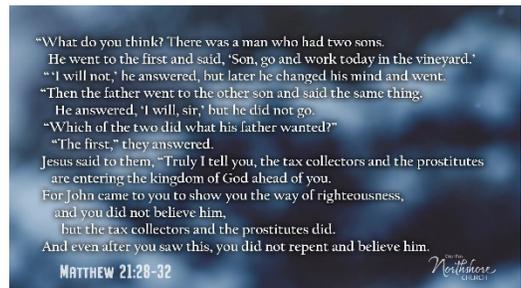
Jesus started by asking “What do you think?” It is important to consider just who it was that Jesus was talking to. We know from the preceding verses that Jesus was in *theological debates* with the religious leaders of the day, in the temple courts. The religious leaders were *grilling* Jesus about His authority.



This is during Passion Week, the week before Jesus was crucified. It is Tuesday, and He is teaching. The religious leaders wanted to know by what authority Jesus taught, worked miracles, and made these claims that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. **They** certainly hadn't authorized Him; they had not *issued a permit* for that Palm Sunday parade.

The leaders wanted Jesus to justify Himself, but with this story of two sons, Jesus called **them** to account.

We ought to be careful about how holy we might think we are, or how holy we want others to think we are. It seems pretty clear that Jesus had a different approach to the **holy** than he did to the **humble**.



<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 21:28–32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I watched parts of an interview recently with Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Church of England (the Anglicans). A [headline in the Guardian](#) caught my attention: “I pray in tongues every day, says archbishop of Canterbury.” That was interesting to me since ***I do too***... the sort of thing you could expect from an Assemblies of God pastor like me, perhaps not the sort of thing you might expect from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

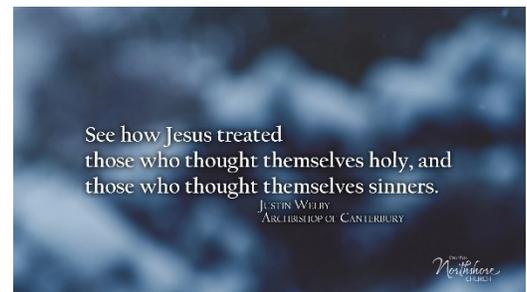
The whole interview was interesting, but I really liked the way he dealt with questions about some of the issues of our day... questions about wrestling with complicated lifestyles and such; here’s a clip.

He said: “Read the Bible carefully... see how Jesus treated those who thought themselves holy, and those who thought themselves sinners.” That’s a powerful directive. If we study and ponder and pray about that, we’ll see that Jesus was ***pretty tough*** of those who thought themselves ***holy***.

When we consider how we might like to be on the receiving end of all that, I think we should choose the way Jesus treated those who thought themselves sinners. So when I am tempted to think of myself as holy (which can be easy to do) I pray that God gives me the grace, conviction, and correction to remember that I best think of myself as the ***sinner*** that I am.

That is the way we want to be on the *receiving* end of all that, and then there is the way we might find ourselves on the *giving* end of all that. We are called to follow the Way of Jesus. Yet, religious people like us so easily do just the opposite. We so easily agree with those who think themselves holy, revering them and celebrating their/our holiness. And we so easily agree with those who think themselves sinners, adding our condemnation and judgement and abuse to whatever self-condemnation that already plagues them.

“See how Jesus treated those who thought themselves holy, and those who thought themselves sinners.” That is what Jesus was *getting at* with this story of the two sons.



There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

<sup>29</sup> "I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>3</sup>

I know that son. I saw him in the mirror this morning.

Am I the only one who routinely finds myself in this situation? Someone tells me to do something, or even asks me to do something... it might even be something that I simply see needs to be done... and my first response is **no**.

Perhaps it is because I'm lazy, or don't want to be bothered. I often think I'm too busy or doing quite enough. Sometimes it is just me not wanting to be told what to do (I'm bad that way).

But then I think about, and/or the Holy Spirit does the work that the Holy Spirit does. Often times that thing comes up again, grabbing my attention again (coincidentally, or maybe not so coincidentally)... and eventually I do the right thing.

I know that son. I see that son in the mirror... and I know that I'm not alone.

<sup>30</sup> "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. <sup>4</sup>

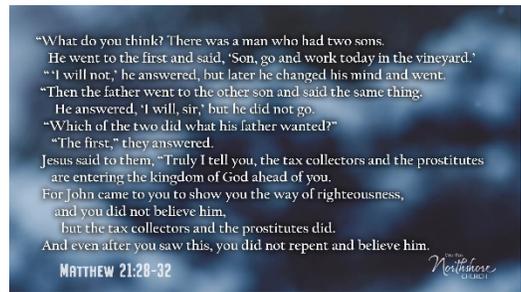
I know that son too. I guess I see him in the mirror from time to time as well (not as often as that first son... I think).

I suppose sometimes when we encounter this second son (or see this second son in ourselves) we are simply dealing with a **liar**... people just telling us what we want to hear with no intention of getting it done.

But perhaps more often there is *some* amount of good intentions... but we quickly forget our commitments, or prioritize something else.

A lot of times it is easiest to say yes. We get the satisfaction of pleasing someone, at least in the moment.

For me, the problem isn't usually that I don't do what I say... but I underestimate how long it will really take. As much as I try to *under-promise* and *over-deliver*, I routinely overestimate my ability to deliver and require more time, or resources, or help than I first considered. (I hope I'm getting better at this now that I'm almost an adult).



<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 21:28–29). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 21:30). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So we have these two sons, one who initially refused his father, but did the work. The other who told the father what he wanted to hear, but did not follow through. Jesus asked:

<sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”  
“The first,” they answered. <sup>5</sup>

Did they get it right?

Speaking as a father, I really think the correct answer is *neither*.

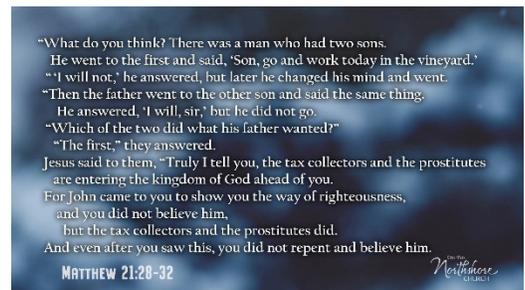
You may have noticed that I’m calling this message *The Third Son*... because from the perspective of a father, I want a **third** choice.

I suppose that if I was forced to choose between the two, I would agree with those who answered Jesus that day. The first son eventually came around, and technically did what the father asked. But what I really want, as a father, is a third option... one who gladly accepted the work and did it.

Neither of these sons serves as the **best** example for us... but the first son *is* better, and Jesus makes the application of His parable:

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup>

Jesus holds up the example of the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the *money-grubbing billionaires* of the day, and the outcasts who catered to the despicable... these were held up as examples of first sons. Their lifestyles and professions were clear indication that they started out by saying **no** to what the Father required... but they responded to the call of John the Baptist to righteousness; they changed their minds (like the first son), and were obedient in the end.



<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 21:31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 21:31–32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

But that was not the most *stinging* part of the application. The religious leaders wanted everyone to think that they were *the third sons* missing from the parable, the sons who said “yes father” **and** obeyed. But with this parable, Jesus exposed that these religious ones were **second** sons... the ones who **said** the right things, but didn’t bother to **do** the right things.

God help us to not be *second sons*. Thank God for His grace so that we can be like *first sons*. And thank God that He gives us new beginnings to be *third sons*, gladly responding to His call and doing it.

There is another story from Jesus about two sons, a longer story of sons similar to these. Hear the words of Jesus from Luke 15.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons.

<sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

<sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’



“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me,  
and everything I have is yours.  
But we had to celebrate and be glad,  
because this brother of yours was dead  
and is alive again;  
he was lost and is found.”

LUKE 15:31,32

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<sup>31</sup> “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” <sup>7</sup>

Two sons... we could ask the same question again:

<sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

The first son in this parable was like the first son in the first parable; the **prodigal son** first refused to obey his father... yet, eventually, he came around. He humiliated himself, returning to his father a *different man* after learning difficult lessons through suffering. And this now *humble* son was celebrated. He was dead, and then was alive... lost and then found.

The second sons in the parables were alike as well. In this parable, the ordeal with the *prodigal son* revealed something dark in the older son. The older son *appeared* to obey and honor his father, but the ordeal with the prodigal son revealed that the older son did not have **the heart of the father**. He may have appeared to obey the father. He shared the father’s work, but did not share the father’s heart.

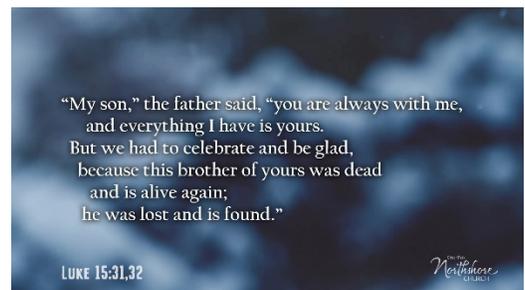
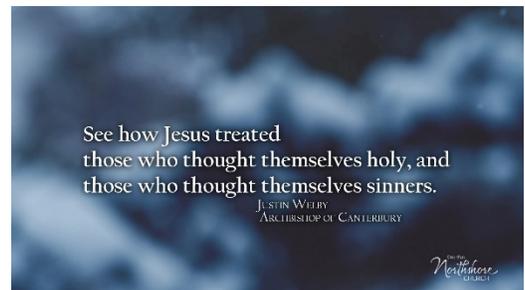
“See how Jesus treated those who thought themselves holy, and those who thought themselves sinners.”

The older son (second son) thought himself **holy**. The prodigal son (first son) now knew himself a sinner.

Just as in the first parable, neither of the two sons in the parable are held up as the **ideal**. Should we pattern our lives precisely after either son?

Should we be the hard-hearted older one, dutifully obedient, exhausted from work, yet without the father’s **heart** of compassion?

Should we be the *prodigal*, indulging in some sort of Amish *Rumspringa*, with the hope that we’ll eventually come around.



<sup>7</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 15:11–32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

No... we should want a better option. There should be a third son to emulate... one who obeys joyfully, one who always honors the father, one who has the father's heart.

I suppose we could think of Jesus as that unidentified third son... only Jesus is the truly obedient One, the One who truly shares the Heart of the Father.



And we are called to that Jesus Way.

How might we manage to walk more like that Third Son?

We could start by identifying the ways in which we see the other sons in our lives.

- When we only give the appearance of obedience, getting the satisfaction of others seeing us say “yes father” but not following through.
- When we are learning to be obedient, yet find that our first response is the self-centered or disinterested one.
- When we see that we are not content with the Father's blessing on us because we resent the Father's blessing on others (less deserving others).
- When we are self-indulgent squandering the Father's blessing with the hope of His mercy as a *safety net*.

There **is** the mercy of the Father; we can count on it. When we find ourselves being like the prodigal, take heart from the words of Jesus. The Father's arms are open wide. And here is the good news... we don't need to keep repeating the same misery. There is new life.

There is mercy from the Father when we find ourselves like those second sons too. Hear the Spirit's call, sense the loving conviction that comes from the Holy Spirit; let's confess our cold hearts, let's leave our wrong motives behind and turn, again to Jesus.

And, of course, we must realize that for us to have the Heart of the Father, we need a heart transplant. It is the promise of God, spoken through the prophet Ezekiel:

<sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.<sup>8</sup>

**This is the heart of the Father, the heart of the *Third Son*.**



Are you hurting and broken within?  
Overwhelmed by the weight of your sin?  
Jesus is calling

Have you come to the end of yourself  
Do you thirst for a drink from the well?  
Jesus is calling

Leave behind your regrets and mistakes  
Come today there's no reason to wait  
Jesus is calling

Bring your sorrows and trade them for joy  
From the ashes a new life is born  
Jesus is calling

O come to the altar  
The Father's arms are open wide  
Forgiveness was bought with  
The precious blood of Jesus Christ



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<sup>8</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Eze 36:26). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.