

I don't have any children, so I have no business commenting on the behavior of the two sons in this gospel. One son says, "Yes, I'll go to the vineyard," but doesn't. The other says, "No, I won't go," but does. Jesus asks which son does his father's will. Speaking as a complete outsider, I'd say neither one of these kids is any good. Give me a kid who says, "Yes, I'll do it," and then does it. Or a kid who says, "I just can't help today," and doesn't. At least you'd know. Who does the will of parents? A reliable kid.

To be fair, many children could turn this parable on their parents. A child says to parents, "Play with me today." One parent says yes, but never does. Another says no, but finally gives in. It would be nice to have reliable people.

But Jesus doesn't offer that option. He knows the real world all too well. He knows that sometimes we want to do something good, we say we will, but then we don't. Or sometimes we say, "No, I won't help," because we're tired, we're jealous, we're angry. But then we do help because we should.

Jesus turns this story on the chief priests and elders of the people. He has a series of controversies with his opponents in Jerusalem the week before he dies. It shows one reason why the plot against his life became so strong. He could not tolerate hypocrisy among religious leaders and they went after him. He tried stories to make them see the difference between what they said they believed and how they really acted.

When Jesus asks the chief priests and elders how they would handle the case in his story, their answer brings their own condemnation. They are like the second son; they say they will do the will of the father, but then they don't. They don't listen to prophets like John and Jesus. Prostitutes and tax collectors -- sinners who now listen to and accept the words of Jesus -- are like the first son. Jesus praises them. Prostitutes who repent find more favor than hypocritical priests.

We like to imagine ourselves as the third child Jesus never mentions, the reliable child, the one who says, "Yes, I'll do your will," and then does it. But often we are not reliable. Still, even if we have said no, we always have a chance to do God's will. If we have ever said no to God about faith, about telling the truth or about loving our neighbor; if we have ever said no to God about virginity, about having a child, about a religious vocation or about contributing to the church -- we can still do what we know is right. We can be the first son, the one who says no, and, entering the vineyard after all, we can still find favor with God.