



Things to Ponder

- [About the Author](#)
- [Order](#)
- [About the Book](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Readers' Comments](#)
- [News & Events](#)
- [A Prayer for the Day](#)
- [Things To Shout Out!](#)
- [Things to Ponder](#)
- [My Favorite Quotes](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Home](#)

Homily – Gospel of Matthew 21:28-32

Introduction: Words and Actions: A Special Rhythm

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the authoritative teacher—the Rabbi, a Moses figure—whom many ordinary folks follow (or at least listen to) but whom the religious leaders reject. And this particular passage clearly shows that mounting tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. He has caught their attention and they wonder: Who is this man? Where does his authority come from? Isn't he just a poor, uneducated man from Nazareth? Who does he think he is? In this Gospel parable, Jesus lays out their failure to heed the call of John the Baptist and for their surprising inability to recognize the Kingdom of Heaven. His story was not well received.

Briefly, the situation Jesus poses is rather straightforward. Given the same task by their father, one son asserts his disobedience in words, but then obeys in his actions. The second son obeys with his words, but disobeys in his actions. The question that Jesus poses is pointed and direct: Which son did what the father wanted? All would agree that “actions speak louder than words” – and that even if his words were disobedient, the son who did the work as ordered did the father's will.

Jesus' conclusion is also direct. The religious leaders, the ones who speak most often about God, did not act accordingly. They did not respond to the message of repentance. Instead, John's message was heeded by those who one would not expect to repent—or even “hear” the call to change their lives—tax collectors (despised by the Jewish people) and prostitutes (the lowest of the lowest in towns). Yet, because of their actions, these sinners will enter the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of the religious leaders!

In short, Jesus could ask you and me the same question. Do our words show our obedience to God? If not our words, do our actions? Our actions (as well as our words) need to reflect the God within us – a divine harmony of word and deed.

I would invite you to take time to read and ponder the words from the Gospel of Matthew 21:28-32.

- What word or words caught your attention?
- What in this passage comforted you?
- What in this passage challenged you?

Take a moment and think of a commitment you will keep this coming week.

Further Questions and Reflections:

This Gospel passage reminds us of something we often can forget: words can be meaningless. Promises are empty when not followed by action. The first son is arrogant but his action shows his goodness. The second son sounds cooperative but fails to keep his promise. Do I make promises to others that quickly go out the window? Why is that?

Jesus asks us to think whether our words and actions are in agreement. It is easy to talk. It is far more difficult to give time, effort, and attention. Do I profess my faith not only in Sunday words but also in the time I give during the working week?

The Kingdom of Heaven is not promised to the “charmers,” but to those whose life would make no sense if God did not exist. Which am I?

Jesus says to you and me: What do you think? Am I like the Jewish leaders who sound good but perform poorly? Or am I like the tax collectors and prostitutes who know their need of God?

There is always time to change, to be converted, to repent, to turn your life around. A person can initially say “No” to God, but still say “Yes” later on in life. Our God is patient.

A strong leader exhibits authenticity and integrity. He or she is called “to be real” in his/her leadership. Name some qualities for effective leadership. Where are you called to leadership today?

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