

We find in today's Gospel we are not dealing with two individuals, but with two groups of people: the sinners and the tax collectors group, and the chief priests and elders of the people group. Jesus is not praising either group. Both groups are imperfect, but He is saying that one of them is better than the other.

Neither son in the parable acted in a way that would bring total joy to his father. Both were unsatisfactory. But the one who finally obeys his father is a lot better than the other. The Readings today challenge us to accept *personal responsibility* for the repentance of our sins and conversion of heart.

In today's Gospel, the parable of the two sons is addressed to the chief priests and elders of the people, and also to all of us today. Its purpose is to show the chief priests and elders that they must take personal responsibility for their sins and their disobedience to God. By means of the story, the Jewish leaders are invited to see themselves, much like looking into a mirror. They may have the right credentials and all the nice words, but they are not doing what God has willed them to do.

The parable outrages the religious people. They realize the first son represents the outcast sinners who said *no* to God but then repented and followed God's way, and so gained entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Here we have an example of someone who takes personal responsibility for his or her life.

However, the second son represents the chief priests and elders. They said *yes* by promising to work for God but failing to do so, and so they have excluded themselves from the Kingdom of Heaven. Here we have an example of the total disobedience of our personal responsibility to God.

After teaching this parable, Jesus tells them that John the Baptist preached repentance to prepare the people for the Kingdom of God. The tax collectors and the prostitutes listened to John and repented of their sins. But the chief priests and elders did not listen to John; therefore, they were condemning themselves for not repenting of their sins. Like the second son, they were only

pretending to be fully interested in saying *yes* to following God's laws, but in actual practice they were doing their own will.

In addressing the chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus tells them they are boasting about their obedience to God's commandments. However, their love is just an illusion and they are not pleasing to God. And the people they despise, the tax collectors and sinners, have repented of their sinful ways and have begun to do the will of God.

To the religious leaders, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you." The chief priests and elders figured they were the chosen people of God and so they should be going to heaven first.

The challenge Jesus is presenting to us is our *yes* or *no* to being obedient to God and repentant of our sins. The different attitudes of the two sons in their saying *yes* and *no* give us cause to think carefully because there is a mixture of both their personalities in our own personal make-up. God has given us our free will.

No matter who we are, we possess the freedom to say *yes* or *no* to God, and we also have the ability to repent of our sins and change the direction of our lives. The parable teaches us that promises can never take the place of commitment. Often it is easier at the time to say *yes* and then not carry out the promise, the commitment, the action, much like the second son who says *yes* yet does not repent. Jesus' parable is speaking to us in our own lives as well today.

Is our *yes* to Christ becoming a *no* in how we live? That is the haunting question of this parable for every one of us.

There is another more troubling side to this parable. Like the second son, we can find ourselves simply going through the motions of prayer and performing the traditions of our faith but the substance of surrender and obedience to God is gone. We may perhaps be saying *yes* to God by coming here to Sunday Mass but then turning our back on what we profess during the rest of the week. Our *yes* has become a *no*.

We are saying *yes* to Jesus and yet we say hurtful things when we are angry, or we are not forgiving and compassionate towards one another, or we gossip about our neighbour. Some married couples have no problem saying *yes* on their wedding day but can sometimes find it increasingly difficult to keep their promise through the ups and downs of life. Is our *yes* to Christ becoming a *no* in how we live?

The Gospel is telling us that our actions speak louder than words. We show our loyalty to our Lord not by words but by standing by Him in good times and bad. Our lives, more than our words, show what we really believe. What we profess to believe has no value and amounts to nothing if we utter words but do not change our hearts and live a good Christ-filled life.

When we willingly acknowledge *personal responsibility* for our sins, change our ways and say *yes* to God, we will reap rewards greater than anything we could ever imagine. The tax collectors and sinners took personal responsibility for their sins, changed their hearts and lives, and by doing so, they reaped the Kingdom of God, and *so can we*.

We are called by Christ to repent of our sins. One can never underestimate the power of repentance, not only to change our life and redirect it toward God, but as a sign of goodness and faithfulness. Repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit and it is good that we have this wonderful *free* gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Confession, instituted by Christ Himself. How long has it been since you received this free gift of Jesus' love and forgiveness in Confession?

Saint John Vianney said, "a parish in which many people go to Confession is a *holy parish* since to repent of one's sins is a gift of the Holy Spirit and where there are many penitents, *the Spirit is strong and at work*."

In one way or another we are each personally responsible for the repentance of our sins and accountable for our promises to God and accountable by our actions about how we live our Catholic life. As the parable tells us, what really counts is what we do, not what we say. The example of the first son who said *no* and then went and did the work in the vineyard teaches us that a

person's *no* can become a *yes*. One day we will stand before the judgment seat of God answerable for our *yes* or *no* and answerable for our sins and answerable for our actions. Based on how you are living your life now, how do you think God will judge you?