

In today's Gospel parable we all can understand, especially parents. A father has two sons and tells them to work in his vineyard. The first son says, "*No, I'm too busy.*" But he goes and does the work. We can appreciate the father's love and forgiveness to the son who finally follows through. The second son says, "*I'm on my way*" but never goes. We can understand the disappointment and anger of the father.

However, in the parable we are not dealing with two individuals, but with two groups of people: the sinners and the tax collectors' group that represents the first son, and the chief priests and elders group that represents the second son. Jesus is not praising either group. Both groups are imperfect, but the one who finally obeyed his father was a lot better than the other. It is the difference between words and actions.

The parable of the two sons is addressed to the chief priests and elders, 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, their disobedience to God and their conversion of heart. 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 a group of people who take personal responsibility for their life, repentant of his or her sinful ways and conversion of heart.

However, the second son represents the chief priests and elders who are so precise about the Law but in their daily lives have not shown the mercy and compassion God wanted. They said *yes* by promising to work for God but failed to do so, and so they have excluded themselves from the Kingdom of Heaven. Here we have the total disobedience of their 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 sinners and tax collectors 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 actuality their lives said "*no*" to obeying God.

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.

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, repentant of our sins and have a conversion of heart. 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 to choose to follow God or not.

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.

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 but then turning our back on what we profess in our faith 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 married 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 are made of and 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*.

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