

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Let us pray: Merciful God and Father, You are gracious to all who bow down before you, and oppose the proud. We ask You, through the power of your word, to make us fear our sinful nature and to find comfort by trusting in Your grace. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Dear Congregation

Earlier in this service, we heard, in the gospel reading, the story of the Pharisee and tax collector, and Elizabeth Köpke explained this parable to the children. The story of an "exemplary" pious man, as it seems, who was not at all like the other people, robbers, deceivers, adulterers, or even that tax-collector. And these are not merely words: He did fast twice a week and gave a tenth of everything he earned. Wonderful. On the other hand, the tax collector did not dare to look up at God, but stammered only from a distance: God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

The Pharisees did not at all expect Jesus to say that it is the tax collector who goes home justified, and not them. When the Pharisees heard this, they were beside themselves. Should their whole effort to do God's will, their efforts not to be like all the others, should it all be in vain, for nothing?

- Why does Jesus always come to the side of these tax collectors and sinners and not to theirs?
- Why does he always challenge them, the Pharisees, with his parables?

Such a parable is also our sermon text for today "The Parable of the Two Sons", we read in Matthew 21, 28-32:

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

A rather incredible story. According to the rules at the time, almost unthinkable, that a father does not simply call his sons to him and forces them, to execute the tasks he assigned to them.

But he went to them. "Dear son," he said, "the work is pressing, go to the vineyard for at least a day." In those days, it was unheard of that a father could get an answer like that of the first son: "No father," no explanation at all - just "I do not want to, I do not feel like working!" And then the father goes to the other son and asks him the same way. He gave the answer that was expected of a son. He then said respectfully "Yes, sir!" - but then he did not go to work and the courteous Yes was the only action.

Rather impossible sons, aren't they? The first rebellious, the second disobedient. Why does this father accept this? Why does he ask, instead of commanding, why does he expect voluntary obedience instead of forcing them to do what he wants? This is all very strange.

But if you ask us to answer the question of who has done the will of his father: Of course, the one who changed his mind and went into the vineyard after all. For the other son, this idiot, we don't mind, if the father will disinherit him!

"It is already done," says Jesus, "and you are this son, Jesus says to the judgmental Pharisees. You are always the Yes-Sayers, who call God, Lord, but do not do what he expects from you!

Even today, we can hear the storm of indignation among the Pharisees. "What? We should be the ones who do not do the will of God? If we do not do it - who else will do it?! Most people do not even know God's commandments, let alone keep them! We are the last ones who take them seriously, at least in principle. Sometimes we transgress them, too - but do look at the others!

They only want to have fun in life, live without sense and reason, and as far as religion and morality are concerned, they do not know their right hand from their left, and they do not care about it. They only do something if it's the "in" thing to do and they conform to every time stream. They think only of money and career, they don't pay attention to consciences and convictions. Look at these people, the Pharisees indignantly exclaimed, "do they do the will of God?"

"No, they do not do it," we hear Jesus answering. "You are so terribly right when you describe and analyse them - the others, like: The Romans and Americans, the economic criminals and prostitutes, the prosperity of the old and the fun and entertainment of the younger generation, the mindless habits of do-good Christians, and the people without any religion ...

To despise others and to wear them down, that's something you do really well, you Pharisees. But I'm tired of listening to your self-righteous talk, "says Jesus," to hear you speak like this, bitter and unloving - your miserable righteousness. Yes, the others may be as you describe them. They are the son in my parable, who turns his back on his father: I will not! However, is it not a possibility, that one of them can turn around to the father, when they realize that he came to him full of love, and did not want to impose obedience, but instead took his no and sadly walked away ...?

Can it not happen, that one of them then is sorry and changes his mind? Sure, he is too ashamed to cry out loudly to the father: I have changed my mind, but then he goes quietly, doing what he should do, knowing that it's the right thing to do...

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. This is what Jesus says on another occasion.

He does not deny that some people like these Pharisees are "more even-handed" or even "better" than others in certain respects. They are by no means just pretending and hypocritical. They really do follow God's commandments and really fulfil them in many individual points. But, to their great surprise, this is actually not what God requires.

Because it can lead to self-righteousness before God and to the contempt of others. This is what Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of. And these kinds of Pharisees still exist today. All who place their principles higher than love. They are not lacking in religious achievements, but they lack in the one deciding factor: in mercy.

That is the will of God. For this, Jesus has come: "that I will not lose anything from all that He (the Father) has given me." And so, he does not praise the glorious Yes-Sayers and eternal dogmatists, but the merciful ones who themselves receive God's mercy. And this mercy, I believe, expresses itself above all in the fact that one is never "finished" with other people once and for all. God never is.

The Pharisees think: sinners remain sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes never change, no person will ever change and become different to what they are! And they also think in terms of themselves: I've never changed, and I do not have to change. I remain faithful to myself and to my principles." And they are also proud of this shiny "yes".

But "it takes more courage to change your mind than to remain faithful to it." I think Friedrich Hebbel once said this. And in the Middle Ages, the Spanish mystic John of the Cross in a letter to Teresa of Avila said: "I want to change the world and I have decided to start with myself. If you join me, we are already two."

The Pharisees, on the other hand, do not want others to join them and change the world and go to heaven with them. They want to stay among themselves and exclude others until they are left alone in the end. Alone in an unchanged world. Alone without mercy. Alone without God ... For God is Mercy.

By always saying Yes, they did not understand this. It is not about fulfilling a sum of individual demands, which are to be fulfilled spasmodically point by point, as much as possible. Because then the doing of God's will becomes like a beautiful achievement that I can boast with and put myself above others – a cut above the rest! "I thank you, God, that I am not like the others."

They want to do something special and therefore to be something special. The Hebrew name "Pharisee" means "the special ones."

But we, we should not be Pharisees, only children of God. That's all. This is not a special achievement, it is nothing extraordinary.

This cannot be determined with the help of loud boasting statements and legal catalogues. The father in our parable does not do it anyway. God does not need to say: "You must do this and that - and then you are my son, my daughter. No, the children of God actually do the will of their father quite automatically.

This is what Jesus has said again and again - and has also challenged the Pharisees with their urge to perform, their addiction to the extraordinary. He simply speaks of the fruits of faith: By their fruits you shall know them. Every good tree brings good fruit - it does it by itself, you do not need to prescribe it. This is how it is with the children of God.

Even after we said "no," even after we had seemingly put ourselves in the Father's doghouse with our disobedience and unfaithful being, Jesus reclaims our lives and gives us the courage to say "yes" in spite of what we once were.

Which of those two sons is doing the will of God? It's really a trick question because neither of them is. But here is the word of grace: Which one of them is God's daughter or son, which one of them does God want to nurture, and mould and change into walking examples of righteousness in the vineyard? All of us are. We are here to witness his love in the world. We are here to make a difference ... actively helping, sharing, giving and forgiving ... and then getting up the next day and doing it all again. We are walking the walk with Jesus. And he is walking us all the way home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all our understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Saviour.

Amen.