THE NEW SHOFAR

Let your deeds be the light that guides others out of darkness. Even the smallest act of kindness can leave the deepest impact

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Let our deeds be the fulfilling of our words

After the parable, Jesus challenges the religious leaders: *Which of the two did the will of his father?* they have no difficulty in answering sincerely, “The first”. And there the lesson could have ended, highlighting the crucial difference in a person’s religious life between saying and doing, a theme of much importance in Matthew’s Gospel (**7:21, 12:50**).

However, Jesus uses their correct answer as a catapult to hurl a massive charge back into their own heart: *Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.* The sudden switch in focus from the two sons in the parable to the *you* whom Jesus is addressing must have been most shocking. Jesus is saying to the religious rulers of Israel that two of the categories of sinners they most despise—tax collectors and prostitutes (in reality : ‘those *you* consider the scum of the earth’)—are far ahead of them in the journey to enter the Kingdom of God. These sinners are said to be entering the Kingdom right now, even as they speak, whereas the chief priests and elders, for all their sanctimoniousness, remain outside, excluded by their arrogance and self-righteousness.

Repent is the heart of the Gospel vocation

What Jesus is seeking from everyone he encounters is conversion of heart. He never elevates the underdog merely because of his condition as underdog, nor does he condemn the rich and the powerful merely because they are rich and powerful. Jesus sees in each person both the need and the possibility to change for the better.

The first part of this episode tells the parable teaching the lesson that what ultimately matters to God is not a reputable appearance, good intentions, and pleasant language, but what we actually *do* with ourselves in the end. But then vv. 31b–32 shows a new direction.

The call to repentance of John the Baptist, who “came to you in the way of righteousness”, is next revealed by Jesus to have been the cause for the conversion of those sinners whom the religious authorities most despised. Note well that Jesus says John came “to you”, that is, to the very chief priests and elders to whom Jesus is now speaking; but “you did not believe him”.

Jesus now cuts even more deeply into their hearts and smugness. He remarks that, even after witnessing the moving spectacle of these converted sinners, the haughty religious experts of Israel thought themselves too empowered, too above the messy reality of sin, to bow their heads humbly and follow suit. Jesus stresses the fact that they have been given chance upon chance to see their hardheartedness and change their ways: “Even when you saw” many sinners believing John and doing penance, he says to them, “you did not *afterward* repent and believe him.”

Is not perhaps the greatest flaw of the arrogant their categorical refusal to follow the good example set by anyone unlike themselves? For these priests and elders to have learned contrition and conversion of heart from sinners whom they despised and for them then to have imitated their way of repentance would have entailed the greatest of moral miracles.

Professing faith is one thing. Living faith-empowered lives another

They had sensed that, if John the Baptist was right in what he preached, then the whole edifice of meaning and power and control upon which they based their entire existence would come tumbling down. Jesus now confirms this by stating that John came to them "*in the way of righteousness*", implying that this was not the way they themselves were treading. As St. Paul affirms in another context: *They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed*" (**Titus 1:16**).

The only "advantage" of sin, if it may be called that, the only positive aspect of initially saying No to God, is that the possibility of repentance still lies in the future. Our greatest enemies are our illusions about ourselves.

The priests and the elders would not listen to either John the Baptist or Jesus because they were sure they themselves already possessed the fullness of truth and that, therefore, in their own minds, *they could not improve their manner of pleasing God*. The tax collectors and prostitutes, on the other hand, did not think much of themselves. They were poor in heart out of the glaring consciousness of their sins, and, therefore, they expected nothing good to come from themselves. This meant that they were ripe to hear the word of conversion and to follow through with a total transformation of their lives. This leaves us with the tough reminder from the teachings of Jesus: **Only converted sinners enter the Kingdom of God**. This affirmation presupposes a recognition of our true interior state before God and a radical change in our way of thinking, speaking, and acting, a change wholly conditioned by the intervention of God's grace in our persons and lives.

Let it be done unto me according to your will

Only the Lord Jesus himself and his blessed Mother always uttered a resounding and wholly reliable Yes to God with both their lips and their lives—he because of his nature as Son and Word, she because of a wondrous work of grace in her. Mary's *fiat* ("let it be to me according to your word", Lk 1:38) was her unwavering Yes extending over every moment of her lifetime. The word "yes" itself no doubt recurred very frequently in Jesus' prayer to his Father as the most concentrated expression of his constant attitude of joyful obedience.

The rest of us, sinners one and all, hesitating perpetually between Yes and No, have only one option: to listen to the voice of Jesus and allow the power and truth of his words to burn through all the layers of our delusions until the core of our utter neediness is revealed to us and we humbly and trustingly claim it as indeed our own, so that we can finally whisper an unyielding Yes to his desire to claim us as his own. Only then shall we experience in our own flesh the full reality that Mary proclaimed at the Annunciation: "*He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away*" (**Lk 1:53**). Only the hungry of heart will say Yes to whatever God offers them.