

**Sunday, October 4, 2020**  
**Matthew 21:28-32**  
**“If You Can’t Say ‘No’, What Good is Your ‘Yes’?”**  
**Michael Stanfield**

‘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. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him. **The words of God for the people of God. Let us Pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer, amen**

As I look out on you who are sitting at home watching this worship service, I look upon a group of individuals who are *in charge*. Whether working or retired or semi-retired – every one of you has been (and many of you continue to be) in charge. Meriam Webster defines being in charge as *having control of or responsibility for (something)*. Trinity is a congregation made up and tends to attract leaders – people who have no trouble taking charge when the situation calls for it or when they are called upon to take it. Being *in charge* is a weighty matter. It carries with it a sense of personal power. It is an unfortunate but sad fact these days that many people want to *be* in charge because of the rush of power that feeling in control can offer. However, for the compassionate, ethical person, being in charge is also a kind of chosen bondage. For, if you have any kind of conscience at all and you are *in charge* – and you know the buck stops with you, until that charge has been executed – whether it is delivering for a client, managing children or leading a project at church – you know two things:

1. Your time is no longer your own, and
2. Your success in completing that charge will depend on surrounding yourself with people you can count on to do what they say they are going to do.

I don’t know about you, but there is nothing more frustrating and demoralizing than being in charge of something important – at home or church or work – something everyone has agreed is worth doing – coming together to plan for that something, and then having people either be non-committal, or commit and not follow through.

And to me, both types of behavior are problematic. Having someone commit and then not show up will automatically cause anyone who is in charge to question that person’s commitment to anything from that time forward. Once one has been burned by someone, whether it is a co-worker or a spouse, it is very hard to trust that person with the same task a next time.

I’ll either leave time to do the task myself or find someone else to do it. If forced to work with that person again, I will try, as diplomatically as possible, to make sure that he or she either is

given a task for which it won't matter as much to the success of the project whether it gets done, or somewhat anxiously go behind him or her every step of the way.

On the other hand, if I am in charge of a big project and someone tells me they absolutely can't be there and then shows up, he or she can now be kind of in the way – because by now, I already have other committed people organized and in place working together toward our common goal.

In other words, you can tell that I really struggle with this parable of Jesus. My experience of being in charge tells me that both of these brothers are unfaithful. I have never thought it quite right that the brother who showed up to work in the vineyard after saying he wouldn't was praised as having done the will of his father.

And according to Gallup, I am not alone. Do you know the number one thing that tends to get a leader in the most trouble with his or her constituents? And I'll give you a hint – it's not sex. The number one thing that tends to get leaders in the most trouble is to vow that they will *not* do something and then they do it anyway.

Don't tell me you're *not* going to do something and then go and do it – am I right?

Yet Jesus tells us that the one who did the will of his father was the one who said, "Read my lips, Daddy, 'I'm not workin' in your stinkin' vineyard,'" but then changed his mind and went anyway.

And the stakes in the parable could not be higher. For the parable is not just about pulling off a successful mission endeavor. It's not about winning over that all important client to save one's business. It's about salvation – being on the right road – doing what is best for us and for others – accepting Christ and God's eternal kingdom as our ultimate way – whatever that might entail.

Could it be, then, that God measures human character and what constitutes success differently from us?

Maybe a real understanding about what constitutes character and success as well as what constitutes the ultimate road to salvation and fulfillment and abundant life requires something besides making sure we *do right* by our charge.

In fact, this parable is really an allegory where each character stands for someone or something else. The father represents a God who desires a partnership with humans. It is significant that the invitation by the father is to work in a vineyard where wine is made. Wine has always been the quintessential symbol of joy-filled transformation. God invites humanity into a partnership whereby a transformation of the essence of what it means to be alive is at stake.

The son who says, "Yes," to working in the vineyard but then doesn't show up represents those of us who say "Yes" to everything we know we *should* say, "Yes" to – including the bible and the church – but we do so out of obligation and or to maintain our good standing in the community. We are rockin' along pretty well; but transformation is the last thing on our minds and hearts; and since our heart is not really in it, we don't follow through.

The son who says, “No,” but then shows up to work in the vineyard represents those of us who reject the invitation to be partners with God in the transformative work of the Kingdom to which we have been exposed, because we believe we know better, but who finally come around on our own and are tentatively ready to commit to the difficult but rewarding work God offers. (Pause)

When I am put in charge of something to this day – even though I know better, I have this neurotic demon that tells me that my character will be judged by the success or failure of the project that is my charge. Since I know how to do many things well, I feel I have no choice but to make my project a success. It’s living by the old Lombardi motto, “Winning isn’t everything; It’s the only thing”

Problem is, for this to work it takes three basic assumptions:

1. That life is ultimately a competition that will separate people into winners and losers
2. That God loves the winners
3. That I have the skills and the desire to become a winner

I go to church because that’s what “God’s Winners” do. I go to Bible Studies because Righteous thinking is what God’s winners have. I study the scriptures and compel myself to increased devotion to become a more perfect human being – certainly more perfect than you. I commit myself to church work so that I can be on God’s winning team. I do all of these things not because I want to but only because I know I should.

But, you know, there is a point at which this gets old. Doing what you ought because of “shoulds” eventually builds up resentments. Being a winner gets to be exhausting. The goal of becoming perfect makes one insufferable. In the end, one finds oneself precisely where the son who says “Yes” to the father is. He knows he ought to be working the vineyard but that’s just the problem. He feels like he has no choice. As a result, he’d really rather be somewhere else – doing almost anything else. His “no” is there. It’s just not really conscious.

And what if you operate under a different set of assumptions? What if you see life as more of an oyster for the taking? What if you would just as soon opt out of any and all competitions – either because you feel they are silly and useless or because you don’t believe it’s possible ever to win? What if life just seems like too much? What then? Your only choice seems to be to simply say “No.” And that is the choice of the other brother in the parable.

And the amazing thing, the wondrous thing, is that God, the father, makes room for that “no”. And I would go one step further. God would actually prefer that we say, “No” to the straight and narrow way – to the life God offers – *and mean it* – than for us to say, “Yes” because we have made Pascal’s wager with our souls. You remember that wager?

Blaise Pascal was the 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician, physicist, inventor and philosopher who argued that a rational person should live as though God exists even if that person doesn’t really believe. Then if God does not actually exist, such a person will have only a finite loss of some pleasures and luxuries in one’s lifetime, whereas one stands to receive infinite gains as represented by eternity in Heaven while avoiding infinite losses from an eternity in Hell.

Well, amazingly, our parable seems to indicate that God would prefer that we say, “No” to that wager if we don’t really believe. With gracious loving patience, God makes room for our ultimate “No”. And this to me is astounding. But even more astonishing: The ability to say “NO” – especially to what’s best for us – is actually what makes grace possible. I’ll say that again: The ability to say “NO” – especially to what’s best for us, is actually what makes grace possible.

It is the gift of realizing that we are really free that creates the necessary space for us to fully experience the transformative Grace of the Father – a Grace that is nothing less than magical, for it is arguably the most powerful experience known to humankind – an instantaneous knowing, in the deepest recesses of our souls that all has always been well between us and the source of all life, all is now well and all always will be well – not because of anything we do or have done, but simply because we are alive and God loves us just because we are alive.

‘Oughts’ and ‘shoulds’ have no place when we are operating out of Grace – not because Grace signals a lack of ethical requirements, but because Grace fulfills them – precisely by replacing the feeling of obligation toward a moral law with deep gratitude for the gift of life.

I have been a licensed Marital and Family Therapist since 1999. Since then, I have probably counseled around 100 couples. And what I have discovered is that marriages often fall apart because there is not enough Grace present – plenty of love but not enough Grace.

If one partner in the marriage develops doubts about the relationship and is brave enough to express them, I can practically guarantee the failure of that marriage if the other partner, who has little or no doubt about the relationship, offers the other no grace by either invalidating those doubts or worse, responding with attempts to hold on to the doubting partner even tighter than before, insisting on a kind of forced physical closeness, often enforcing this closeness by the careful monitoring of cell phones and e-mail accounts.

What is needed is precisely what the non-doubting partner cannot do – and that is to make room for the doubting partner’s “No.” Holding your partner’s marriage vows to God over his or her head when he or she is already unhappy just doesn’t work.

And the fact is that the unhappiness the partner feels about the relationship may have much less to do with the marriage than the unhappy partner first believes. It may, in fact, signal an upcoming transitional period in the life of both partners, for which the Holy Spirit is trying to get their attention. The last thing you want to do is make the doubting partner right by closing the space between the two of you, thereby making your partner really miserable. Unhappiness and anger are simply signals that something is off; something is amiss that needs attention. Saying “No” to the relational status quo can actually be a gift to both spouses.

It is best therefore to find a way to make room for the “No.” After all, if God operates out of a state of Grace, rather than coercion, so should we. Of course, this doesn’t insulate one from the hurt of feeling rejected. On the contrary, it will probably increase it. But that’s what being a Christ-like adult is about – dis-identifying with the feelings of hurt and anger and resentment, so

that a new space is created – a space big enough for the “No” – a space where choice and opportunity – a new possibility for death and resurrection – is created.

If you think about it, this principle has application in all of our relationships. Take our children. If we never make any room for their “No,” then we will have raised either a set of door mats who cannot make a decision for themselves – rage-a-holics who violently rebel against every kind of authority, or manipulators who believe to get what they really need they have to hide their true motives and use seduction or power. Instead, allowing the “No” from time to time and the resultant consequences of the “No” leaves room for a chosen “yes”.

This separates behavior from personhood and leaves room for grace. And without grace, inner growth of any kind is not possible. Movement toward wholeness is not possible. Reciprocal, loving, relationships are not possible.

It’s an extraordinary irony – isn’t it? Intuitively, we try to take charge of our relationships managing them like we would manage a work project. Hence we tend to do everything we can to steer those relationships away from any possibility of the “No!” towards “success.”

Yet, this very act actually creates a greater buildup of the “no” in the other, increasing the likelihood that the “yes” we hear we may not be able to trust.

Making room for the “No” puts the onus back on the one who has uttered it. It is an act of compassion that leaves room for individual expression. It gives the other an opportunity to honestly and courageously face both inner and outer obstacles – to set boundaries. Whether it is the two year old refusing to eat, the football player taking a knee in protest during the singing of the national anthem, a spouse expressing deep doubts about a marriage, or one saying, “no thanks” to God’s invitation to work in the vineyard, Jesus would say that the graceful response is to make room for it while continuing to offer understanding and grace.

Until we accept the possibility of the “NO” – especially from the ones we love, our love remains short-sighted and self-centered, and we are filled with worry and fret. We can’t trust the “Yes” we hear because we have not given the other a choice. And who wants to be with anyone who is only with us because they are forced to be?

God is the same way. God doesn’t want us to feel like we *have* to be with God. God doesn’t want us to feel like we have no choice but to be obedient to our Father. Amazingly, God wants us as partners in God’s transformative work in the vineyard.

The choice is ours.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we give you thanks that you are the loving compassionate father who leaves room for our “No” so that we might graciously choose to be with you. Give us that same measure of compassion in our dealings with the people in our lives.

And now bless the portion of our resources and of ourselves that we return to you that your kingdom might truly be at hand. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen