

## Sunday School Advocate.

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### THE TWO SONS.

Matthew xxi. 28-32.

The connection of this parable begins in ver. 23. Some of the chief priests and elders (rulers) came to Jesus, asking Him "by what authority" He taught the people. If they had really cared to know, they had had plenty of opportunity of learning from our Lord's miracles, as well as from His words, that He was sent from God (John v. 36; x. 25; iii. 2). Or if they had really wanted more information, no doubt He would have satisfied them, as He did Nicodemus and others. He always answered inquiries according to the spirit in which they were put. If any one came to him with a sincere desire to be taught, He never sent him away unsatisfied (John i. 38, 39; iv. 7-26; Matt. xiii. 10, etc.; John xii. 20-23). If any one questioned Him from mere curiosity, as the disciples did sometimes, He usually gave no direct answer, but made some pointed personal appeal (Luke xii. 23, etc.; John xxi. 21, 22); but if they came, as the Jews often did, "tempting Him," He answered by another question, or by a parable, which made them condemn themselves, and exposed their hypocrisy and hardness of heart (Matt. xiv. 1-4; xxii. 15-22).

It is the same with the Bible. The Bible is not given to tell us all that we should like to know, but to be to each of us a practical guide to eternal life. It is not great learning or talent that is the most essential thing to understanding it, though of course these may render great service in their proper place, but a *teachable spirit*. The Bible will be to us what we are to it (Ps. xviii. 26). If we go to it to cavil and make objections, or even if we go to satisfy our curiosity on points which do not practically concern us, and which God has therefore not clearly revealed, we shall find it full of difficulties. But if we go, each for himself, asking wisdom, and offering David's prayer (Ps. cxix. 18, 34, 125), we shall find it a sure and unerring guide (Ps. cxix. 105; Jas. i. 5).

Jesus answered the priests and elders here, by asking them another question. They asked Him what His authority was; He asked them what the authority of John the Baptist was. John had borne witness to Jesus (Matt. iii. 11; John i. 29, 33, 34), so if they believed in John, they must have believed in Jesus, too. But they *would not* believe, because He denounced their hypocrisy (Matt. iii. 7-10), yet they were afraid to confess their unbelief for fear of the people; so they said, "We cannot tell." Hypocrisy, prejudice, fear of man, evasion, succeeded each other. They *could not* tell, because they *would not*. So our Lord refused to tell them, any more distinctly than they knew already, what His authority was. They didn't use the light they had, and no more was to be given them (Mark iv. 24, 25). It was not more *evidence* they wanted, but more *faith*. The brightest sunshine will not enable a blind man to see: and they were blind (John viii. 43, 45, 47; ix. 39-41; 2 Cor. iii. 14, 15). We are all blind by nature, till Christ gives us light (Rev. iii. 17). Let us pray to Him, as Bartimæus did, to open our eyes according to His promise (Mark x. 51; Isa. xlii. 6, 7; Eph. v. 14.)

Christ then spoke this parable, which is so simple as hardly to need any explanation. We have a vineyard, and a father who orders his sons to go and work in it. There is no mention of wages, for he had a perfect right to his sons' labour, God has a right to all we have and are (Ezek. xviii. 4; Acts xvii. 28); and if He rewards us, it is of His free bounty.

The two sons represent two of the great classes of men. The first, who refused to go, those who are openly

wicked. The "publicans" were the men who collected the Roman taxes. These taxes were "farmed," i.e., the collectors paid a certain fixed sum to the government, and then extorted as much as they could from the people, that they might make as large a profit as possible. They overcharged whenever they had an opportunity (Luke iii. 13); they brought false charges of smuggling, in the hope of extorting hush-money (Luke xix. 8); and often became rich by their dishonesty (Luke xix. 2). Even among the Romans they were called "the wolves and bears of society;" and among the Jews, who had to pay the taxes to a foreign power, they were even more hated, and were regarded as "traitors and apostates," who took part in and profited by the humiliation of their country. Hence they were classed, as here, with the lowest characters, with sinners (Luke xv. 1), and with heathen (Matt. xviii. 17). They were not to be associated with (Matt. ix. 11), and "no money known to come from them was allowed to come into the alms-box of the synagogue or temple."

The second son promised to go, but did not, and represents those who profess to serve God, but are not His servants at heart. The "chief priests and elders," often mentioned with the "scribes" or lawyers, (who were commentators and expounders of the law) were the leaders of the people, and by their position professed to be especially the servants of God. They were very self-righteous, and, like all the Jews, proud of being descended from Abraham, and of being the people whom God had chosen from among the nations (John viii. 33, 39; Rom. ii. 17-20.)

Let us learn these lessons:—

#### I. *God requires practice more than profession.*

We all in a sense profess to serve God. We are baptized, we attend the worship of God, read the Bible, join in prayer, and probably consider ourselves very different from the heathen, or those who are openly wicked. But if our religion is only outward, it is *worse than useless* (Isa. i. 11-14; Ps. i. 16, 17; Amos v. 18-22; Matt. xxiii. 27, 28; Rom. ii. 21-23).

#### II. *No amount of past sin need prevent forgiveness.*

These publicans and their associates were very bad indeed, yet they were received by Christ, and admitted to His kingdom (ver. 31; Matt. ix. 11-18. See also Isa. i. 18; lv. 7; 1 John i. 7-9; 1 Tim. i. 15, 16; John vi. 37).

#### III. *Sin must be repented of and forsaken.*

It is possible to be proud of not being a Pharisee. People say sometimes, "Oh we are not hypocrites; we make no profession of religion;" as if that excused their want of practice too. But these publicans were only better than the priests because they knew they were wicked, and the others did not; just as a man who has a dangerous disease and knows it, is more likely to be cured than one whose disease is latent and hidden. But both will die unless they go to the physician.

Let us pray to be shown our need of the Great Physician, and go to Him to be healed. We hope the children will read in their Bibles, the texts referred to in this article.

### THE BEAR'S DINNER.

"O, Papa! please tell us a story now, while you have nothing to do."

So exclaimed one and another of the group of little ones, climbing around their father, as he sat resting by the evening fire.

"Well, as I have 'nothing to do' I suppose I must. What sort of a story shall it be?"

"A bear story," said one; "O yes, tell us about the bear who stole a dinner."

Papa protested that he had told that story over and over again, but indulgently gave it again as requested.

We listened, too, to the story which was such a favourite with the children, and as we have never read it in the newspapers, we thought it might perhaps amuse our little folks.

"A good many years ago," said papa, "before I was born, my father and mother went to live in the northern part of New York State. If you look in your map now, you will see towns and villages dotted about where then there were scarcely any settlements—nothing but thick woods.

"Bears in 'em?" asked a boy with wide opened eyes.

"Yes, woods with bears in 'em—only think!"

"I shouldn't think your father and mother would have liked to go and live where the bears were."

"O, the bears did not often trouble settlers. I do not know that any ever came near my father's place. But afterwards, when they had come back to the East to live, and I was a little fellow climbing on my father's knee, just as you do now, he used to tell me this story about a man who settled out there—I suppose somewhere near them.

"This man had built a saw-mill, some distance from his house, and often he used to go to the mill to work all day, taking his dinner with him.

"You have seen a saw-mill? You know its use is to saw big, heavy logs—the trunks of trees—into nice, smooth boards, to build houses with.

"Well, one day the man had been hard at work all the morning at his mill, and when it drew near noon he began to feel hungry, and thought he would stop and eat his dinner. So he sat down on a large log upon which the saw was working, with his tin pail by his side. Was he afraid of the saw? Oh no; he could jump off at any moment if he came too near the saw.

"While he was eating the good things which his wife had put up for him, and thinking of his work, his home and his babies, who should come up but a rough old bear!

"Bruin smelled the goodies and thought he would put in for a share. So he quietly mounted the log on the other side of the dinner pail, and stuck his nose into it, as who should say, 'Give me some.'

"The good man was somewhat startled, you may believe, by the appearance of such a visitor. Of course he would not be so impolite as to refuse him a share of the feast; but he was afraid that when Bruin had finished his dinner, he might take it into his head to give him a loving hug by the way of thanks, so he prudently withdrew to a safe distance, and gave up the whole to him. Bruin munched in perfect content, with his nose in the pail and his back to the saw, while the owner of the dinner looked on from his hiding place, and wished for his gun.

But, in the meantime the log had been gradually working up towards the saw, and now all at once the bear felt a slight nip at his tail. At this he growled and gave an angry shake, moving a little further along the log. Presently he received another nip, and growled more savagely, but could not turn from his delightful repast. But when he was moved a third time within reach of the saw, and felt another bite, his bear nature could stand it no longer; so he turned in a rage, and hugged the old saw with all his might. And what happened then? Why, of course he was cut in two; and the man had bear meat enough for a number of dinners, besides nice bearskin caps for his little boys to keep their ears warm.

"Now you have been told to look out for a moral in a story; what shall we learn from this? Why,

"1. That he who steals a dinner is likely to pay dear for it.  
"2. That he who flings himself in a passion against anything which annoys him will be apt to get sorely cut and wounded thereby, and make matters very much worse."