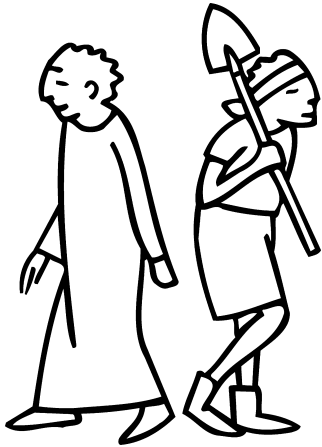


YEAR A - THE YEAR OF MATTHEW

# THE HOLY GOSPEL

PENTECOST 15    SEPTEMBER 25, 2011



*The Holy Gospel is according to  
St. Matthew the Twenty-first  
Chapter.*

**Glory to you, O Lord.  
*The Authority of Jesus  
Questioned***

**W**hen Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

**24** Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

**25** Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

**26** But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

**27** So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

### ***The Parable of the Two Sons***

**28** "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' **29** He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. **30** The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

**31** 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.

**32** 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.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord.*

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Sermon - September 25, 2011

Year A - Year of Matthew - Pentecost 15

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Here is a saying we have heard before: "Actions speak louder than words." Simply put, it means

that I might say all kinds of things, I might have all kinds of good intentions, but the reality of my character is found less in what I say or in my intentions, but in what I do.

I would love to be judged only by my intentions. If I were, I would be free to see myself as a completely good person with little or no fault. However, intentions are worth only so much. How I actually treat people is what matters.

“Actions speak louder than words.” There is another truth out there. That truth is that our lives are made by the composite of the decisions we make. Humans have been given the gift of choice. In every situation, we have a choice. No matter how difficult we still have choices in how we act, react, and respond. The way in which those decisions express themselves, the way in which our choices is manifested is by what we do or fail to do.

If we were to give a theme for today’s Gospel, it would have to be the line I started with: “Actions speak louder than words.” St. Matthew writes the words of Jesus, “A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vine-

yard 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?"

This Gospel tells us that God will judge us, not by what we say, but by what we do. We will not be able to blame others for our faults. Nor will we escape punishment if we ignore the truth when we hear it.

However, this Gospel also says that God is merciful and will not remember our transgressions and sins when we confess. He expects us to learn from our mistakes and from his instruction. In addition, among the qualities that God desires is willingness to sacrifice our own wishes for the sake of obedience. If we refuse to obey, and then have second thoughts and obey, God will be merciful.

Actions speak louder than words. It is an old saying but it is also a valuable one for it defines us and shapes us.

Now there is another word that I feel also has a connection to this Gospel. We overuse an important word. That word is "if." "If" is a game we

play with ourselves most of our lives. We have all done it. “If only I had done this. If only I had not done that. If only I could have done this. If only I had taken this job or gone to that school. If only I had waited before buying this thing. If only I had said this when that happened.” We run through this game almost without thinking about it. It is almost automatic.

In a way, the game of “If” is the opposite of a decision. It is looking back on decisions that we could have made and constantly second guessing them. It is looking at what was and wishing it was not. We can only lose at a game. Played once, we might learn from our mistakes. However, our tendency is to repeat the moments of “what if” in our lives. “What if” is neither action nor good intentions. It is only regret.

The game of "if" is destructive for many reasons, but perhaps mostly because it shows such a lack of trust in God. When I am constantly second-guessing the decisions made, and when I am always feeling regret over them, I show a lack of trust in God. This is because I do not let myself realize that God forgives, but God also takes those mistaken decisions, and is able in his own way to turn them into something I never intended.

Jesus is saying something to us in today's Gospel. When talking to the Pharisees, Jesus says something that would have made the Pharisees fall off their collective chairs. He scolds the Pharisees by saying, "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 Pharisees who saw themselves as the height of virtue would have been scandalized to hear that these traitors to the faith would even be entering the kingdom of God let alone ahead of them. The difference is that the tax collectors and prostitutes heard John the Baptist and believed him. The Pharisees did not. The Pharisees often had good intentions, but their actions were just as often destructive towards others. The Pharisees could see all the faults and bad decisions, but they could not see God's goodness and grace.

We can go through our lives with good intentions and meaningless actions or we can go through life constantly cursing ourselves for if only we had

done this or said that. However, both of these do nothing. Jesus asks us to do one thing: “Do the will of my Father who is in heaven.” This is not to be met by professions of obedience, which are not matched by actions. We are to seek to do his will over our own. When we fail, we are to learn from that failing. We are to ask God’s forgiveness and then move on. We do not catch ourselves in “what if.” We do not immerse ourselves in saying we will do something different but then never make the effort. God calls us to step forward and act.

Now, we may fail when we act. We may trip over ourselves when we act. We may make a mess of things when we act. We may not do things quite as we should. Never the less, we are to act. We act; we move forward and we trust God to forgive us and guide us as we move.

The Pharisees heard John the Baptist and stayed stuck in who they were. The tax collectors and prostitutes heard John the Baptist, they believed, and they moved. By God’s grace they moved. God changed them. They followed his will over their own. Moreover, it was by that transformation that the world saw the fruit of their faith. It was by the obedience to God’s Word they were known. How is it that we are known, and by

whose grace do we live? It is Christ and Christ alone who is our hope, life, and salvation. It is by him we are known. Amen.