

## Heaven's Secrets: Repentance

Since Cain and Abel, parents have struggled with sibling rivalries; the ways they all test the limits of authority, dodge chores, create bad cover-ups. Some are, of course, much more creative in getting out of chores than others.



The toughest kids to deal with in a family are, I think, like Eddie Haskell on the old television program, *Leave it to Beaver*. Here's a typical Eddie quote: 'Wally, if your dumb brother tags along, I'm gonna - oh, good afternoon, Mrs. Cleaver. I was just telling Wallace how pleasant it would be for Theodore to accompany us to the movies.' You can't trust a word he says.

Kids like the 'Beav' are a challenge too, but ultimately get it right. Beaver would put up a fuss over his parents authority, but eventually he comes around and is the good boy all of the parents in the viewing audience wanted their kids to see and become.

I wonder which of the two sons' traits you most emulated as a child, and which of the two sons' traits you emulate today? Were you the disobedient child who eventually becomes obedient to authority, or the child who confronted with authority was obedient in words but disobedient in action? Have you changed?

Jesus' story is so relatable because we are all able to identify with someone. But, before we get to the story, let's look at the background.

This event happens probably on Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is teaching in one of the open-air porches of the temple in Jerusalem. Just a day before he had been there too, and he got so upset with what was going on he literally turned the tables...dumping over the money and animals, generally making a mess of things and destroying the businesses of lots of merchants. Just who did he think he was, engaging in this type of vandalism and disruption to commerce?

The religious leaders want to know who gave Jesus his authority to ruin the temple trade. They mean this as a trap. They suspect, perhaps even fear, that he is the Messiah, but they really want a confession from his own lips. They want him to say his authority over the Temple comes directly from God and then they can charge him for blasphemy, and he can be killed for that. So, Jesus, knowing it is a trap, instead answers their question with another question: where did John the Baptist get his authority to announce the forgiveness of sins to those who repented of their sins and were baptized in the River Jordan?

Now the religious leaders are trapped. If they say humans gave him that authority, then they will upset their congregation because they will be denying

John had God's authority to baptize them into the kingdom of heaven. But if they say God gave John the Baptist the authority, then they will be admitting Jesus is the Messiah, because John had, as Calvin puts it, 'pointed the finger' and identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So what do the religious leaders do? They feign ignorance. "We don't know." This is, of course, a lie. They know it's a lie. Jesus knows they are lying. The people suspect they are lying. They are losing this debate very quickly. Jesus, sensing the moment, says, then neither will I tell you the source of my authority over the Temple.

Instead, Jesus continues, let me tell you a little story about a father, a vineyard and his two sons.

The father represents God; the vineyard is to represent the people Jesus wanted harvested to populate for the kingdom of heaven. But who do the sons represent? Jesus dramatically saves that revelation.

The story is simple. The first son says to his father, 'No way I am helping you harvest grapes, Dad. Go get someone else. I have places to go, people to see. See ya!' But then, later, he turns around and goes back to help his father in the vineyard.

The second son, who Eddie would portray, says, 'of course, Dad, I will help. You know you can always count on me.' Then he calls his buddies and heads into town for fun and games. All talk, no action.



Which of the two did what the father asked? The answer is obvious. The first. But just whom did Jesus intend these two sons to represent? The shock is that the first son represents the 'tax collectors and prostitutes', people we will refer to collectively as the 'sinners.' They are the rejected class of Jesus', the people polite society despised. No one wanted their child to grow up to be either a tax collector or a prostitute. The second son represents the religious leaders, the outwardly pious people of that day and of our own, who put on a good show but are living a lie.

Then the real shocker: it is the *sinners* who are headed for the kingdom of heaven, while the *religious* folks, are trailing behind, perhaps never getting in.

What is the difference between these two groups? Repentance. Changing our tunes. Turning our lives around. This is what God is interested in...not what we say with our lips but what we do with our lives.

It is of no value to God for us to say we love and worship and serve God if those are only words. God knows our hearts not by what we say but by what we do. Do we serve the poor and clothe the naked and house the homeless?

These things don't come to anyone naturally. To love God and to love our neighbors requires us to change our habits and our priorities, that is, to repent, to turn around our attitudes and priorities.

Let us not be fooled into thinking we are all right with God and headed for the kingdom of heaven if we are loyal to God only with our lips. The professions of lying lips save no one.

Salvation, entering the kingdom of heaven, is reserved not for the outwardly religious but for all of those sinners, like you and me, who show our gratitude for God's grace by living obedient lives that seek justice and pursue mercy and walk humbly with our God, submitting to the authority of Jesus, as disclosed through the testimony of John the Baptist.

What God is looking for is not empty outward perfection but a full inward confession. And then God is looking for people who will do the work of harvesting in the vineyard. Not people who say they will serve God but never manage to

quite get into it. No, God wants people who will turn around their lives, confessing their sin with their lips and living out that confession with their deeds.

Scott Hoezee writes that “...vineyard work is grace work; it is compassionate and merciful work. Vineyard work is not about focusing on yourself and other upstanding, good folks like you.”

This is the mission of our church now. We are called to not only turn our lives around for our own good but for the good of the vineyard. Making priorities that will bring others into the knowledge of God, just as they are. Just as I am, I repent, turn my life around. ‘Just as you are’, that is our message to the community we serve.

Hoezee again, “...vineyard work was always supposed to be first and foremost about others, starting with the folks you feel the most tempted to overlook (if not outright condemn).

“When you say “Yes” to God the Father, Jesus claims, you are simultaneously saying “Yes” to the least, last, lost, and lonely people God holds dear. So if you say “Yes” to God but then focus only on your own piety or on other people who are already just as religious as you are, then you are essentially

being like the son who said all the right things when Daddy asked but who turned right around and did nothing that the father really wanted.”

John Calvin teaches the point clearly: “...faith does not consist solely in a person’s giving assent to true doctrine, but that it embraces something greater and loftier, that the hearer, renouncing himself, devotes his life wholly to God.”



Our Catechism makes these same point. When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come”, we are petitioning God to ‘Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you.’ You see, we are praying that God would teach us how to obey the God-given authority of our Father in Heaven as revealed in the life and work of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

What is Heaven’s Secret to becoming a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? Jesus wants us to repent of our sinful refusal to obey the authority of Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives.

The point is, and here is today’s big idea, we all need to turn our lives around by submitting to the authority of Jesus, and if the ‘worst’ of sinners can enter the kingdom of heaven through repentance, so can you. The opposite is true too: people who put on a good show by showing up in all the right places and saying all the ‘holy’ words will never enter the kingdom of heaven unless they too

repent, turn their lives around, by first recognizing and then submitting to the authority of Jesus.

Who will enter the kingdom of heaven? People who forgive as they have been forgiven. People who are generous with God's love. People who repent, turn around their lives and recognize Jesus' authority over their lips, their hearts and their bodies.

Don't think you can be a Eddie Haskell and get away with fooling anyone. Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver were not fooled by Eddie's act, and God is not fooled by our empty words either. Let your words of obedience to the authority of Jesus Christ be matched by your actions.

If you want to become a citizen of heaven today, come just as you are. Then commit to turning your life into a God-glorifying 'yes' to the Father's commands to love God and your neighbor.