

“Are you going to show up or aren’t you?” We’ve all had to answer that question. If you’ve ever led a group or a church committee, or if you’ve ever issued invitations to anything—whether it’s a party, a meeting, a work day or a wedding—you can’t escape this question. You look down the guest list and the mostly absent RSVPs and that’s your question as well: “Are they going to show up or aren’t they?”

Jesus brings up this phenomenon in the all too real setting of a family: There are these two sons, he says. Their dad reminds them both that there are chores to do. “Are you going to show up or aren’t you?” the Dad asks. The first one says he won’t, but he changes his mind and does his chores. The second son says he will, but he doesn’t. Which one did what his Father wanted?

Of course, we all know the answer to this question, but there is more involved than immediately meets the eye.

First of all, we’ve all learned not to count too much on either of those answers because sometimes “no” gets turned around and, to our surprise, the job gets done.

And sometimes “sure” gets crowded out by other tasks or a phone call from a friend or any other excuse that comes to mind.

We’ve also been both of these sons, haven’t we? We’ve said “no” to things that we later decided to do. More often, however, we are the second son. We say a determined “yes,” but don’t remember that we’ve already booked two other appointments for that same time.

We assure our boss or our spouse that we will finish a project by the end of the week, but the weekend comes and goes and the project still sits there, untouched.

“Yes” is the easiest possible answer to almost any question. It’s what people want to hear. It eliminates friction—at least in the near future. But showing up is another matter entirely. This picture is almost too familiar. Whether we cast ourselves in the Father’s role or the sons’, we’ve all been there.

But today’s gospel is primarily a story of two sons who dramatizes the classic difference between lip service and performance. We encounter two sons who are not who they appear to be. And so the real question that Jesus’ poses is: Who is the better son?

The key to the correct understanding of this parable is that it is not really praising either one.

It is setting before us a picture of two very imperfect sets of people; neither son in the story was the kind of son to bring full joy to a parent. Both were unsatisfactory, but the one who in the end is obedient was incalculably better than the other.

The ideal son would be the son who accepted the Father’s orders with obedience and with respect and who unquestioningly and fully carried them out. This story tells us that there are two very common classes of people in this world:

- 1) There are the people whose promises don't match their follow through; they promise anything, they sign up for everything, but their practice lags far behind.
- 2) Then there are those whose practice is far better than their attitude; they claim to be tough, hardheaded pragmatists, but find themselves doing kindly things, almost in secret.

And this understanding prompts me to ask: Just who is it that we do make time for?

The parable teaches us that promise can never take the place of performance and fine words are never a substitute for fine deeds.

Furthermore, we can easily spoil a good deed by the way we do it as when we bitterly complain before we comply, or by making everything a tug of war as when we argue every point.

And so the Christian way is in performance and not in the promise. But there is a deeper meaning, hiding in this parable, and the stakes are actually higher because of what Jesus is really asking: Are you going to show up for God or aren't you?

That's really what he's asking: Are you going to be like the tax collectors and the prostitutes who have shown up for God? Or are you going to be like the religious leaders who haven't?

We should note that when we talked about those two sons, we left out a very important piece of the way Jesus told the story: When we talked about chores, Jesus was pointing to a very specific chore: working in the vineyard.

That work, of course, could involve pruning and fertilizing and harvesting. But when we find vineyards in the Bible, they often carry a weightier meaning.

The image of a vineyard often refers to God's kingdom. When the Dad reminds his sons that it's time to get to work in the vineyard, Jesus probably means something larger than agriculture. He has God's kingdom work in view here.

Suddenly the sons' answers seem more significant than we realized. This is a bigger deal if they are responding to God's call to get to work! The first says "not today," but then changes his mind and does what God was asking.

The other says "sure," but stays firmly planted on the couch, leaving that kingdom work to languish.

Obviously, what is called for is a good dose of "stick-to-it-ness." The Bible calls this character trait perseverance or steadfastness. And there seems to be precious little of it going around these days.

After all, we are better starters than finishers, better at quitting than completing. Recall that Jesus had to walk steadily and faithfully toward his sacrificial death over the period of several years. He had plenty of time to rethink his decision, to change his mind, to choose an easier path or to simply quit.

It has been said that "the essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be long obedience in the same direction and that this obedience is what make life worth living."

After all, obedience to Jesus is the whole point of discipleship.

After all, being a Christian is not simply about what one says, believes, professes, wears or puts on one's vehicles. It is not about our thoughts on hot-button issues, which side of the political aisle we vote for or whether we attend a church with a particular theological emphasis or practice. We can cozy up to the church, but if all we have is the exterior of religion, we are missing out on so much more.

Our culture is often tied to those who simply provide lip service. We have purchased warranties counting on the promise of the manufacturer, only to find tiny print voiding the warranty when we need it. We have been lured into relationships with smooth-talkers who later show their true colors. We have heard politicians who promise us the moon in order to get into office, but who never follow through once there.

When it comes to religion, our culture wants to see people of faith who are genuine, who follow through on their convictions. Those who look at the church from outside want evidence of integrity, want to see people who say what they mean and mean what they say.

They are skeptical of those who talk the talk until they have seen them walk the walk. Our culture has had its' fill of those people who have an interest in religion, but who are not willing to have their lives changed by that religion. After all, an interest in Jesus is not the same as being a committed disciple of Jesus.

We can be those disciples by heading into the vineyard and getting our hands dirty for the sake of the gospel. God wants people who will meet friends at a coffeehouse for the sole purpose of listening to them when they feel alone or people who will drive an elderly neighbor to a doctor's appointment or will babysit children while a couple wishes to reconnect on a date night.

God wants those who will work at the local clothing drive, soup kitchen or Habitat for Humanity project so others will not be naked, hungry or homeless.

Jesus is calling you and me to move out from the comfort of the four walls of our church where it is easy to say yes and actually go out into the vineyard to do the work our Father has asked us to do.

What is required, what the world needs to see, is a follower of Christ who keeps following, especially if the road goes uphill through difficult terrain of life.

People do not listen to the tongues in our heads; they watch the direction of the toes in our shoes.

It all comes down to obedience and this is the point that Jesus was making in our gospel reading today: He asked which son did the will of the Father:

The one who is full of quick willingness, but no follow through or the son who initially refuses but then thinks better of it and goes to work in the Father's field?

If we want our evangelism to be effective, if we want others to truly come into a radical encounter with Jesus, we will be far more successful by showering others with acts of love, grace and compassion than we would be by lip-syncing all the right words. After all, faith invites us to be faithful, to trust and, most importantly, to look back over our lives and see God's activity throughout.

Consequently, Jesus calls us to a long obedience in the same direction because in the long run, it is the only way to find a life- truth worth living. Never give up, never give in, never quit in the long obedience to Christ. In the end, it will all be worth it.