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## **He Said He Would -- But He Did Not Matthew 21:28-31**

Our Lord, indeed, was a spiritual genius: with remarkable brevity, he presented us with two basic types of people. There are those who say they won't do something and then they do. There are those who say they will do something and then they don't. Jesus tells of a father who goes to one of his sons and asks, "Will you work in my field today?" and the son swells up and says, "No." Then this son ponders his refusal and, according to Jesus, repents of his obstinacy and goes and does what he said he wouldn't do. Oh, he is an interesting character – but we will leave consideration of him and his strange behavior in abeyance until next week.

Jesus also offers us a more common character, one who perhaps resembles many of us. He is the son to whom the father comes and asks, "Will you go work in my field today?" and he replies, "Sure! I'll go!" But having said that, he does not go. He said he would, but he did not. But as we move into a new year, when we not long ago articulated our good intent into sentences like "I resolve to lose ten pounds"; "I resolve to become more spiritually mature"; "I resolve to stop smoking"; "I resolve to cherish my children more"; "I resolve to commit my life to Christ more completely"; "I resolve to become so positively disciplined"; "I resolve to increase my commitment to the church" – at such a time we do well to ponder the example of a son who clearly said to his father, "I resolve to go into your fields," and then did not go. We do well to ponder why we say, "I resolve to do this or that," and then fail to follow through. What does such a phenomenon tell us about the meaning of our words? About the relationship of our words to our soul? About how well we know ourselves? About how serious we are about meaningful change?

Possibility number one: the son could simply be telling a lie. He could be telling his father that he will go into his fields and work, just so the father will go away. He wouldn't be the first child to tell a parent, "Yeah, I'll do that," just to get the parent off his back. That's been done a time or two in the history of the world. He could be saying Yes to the father knowing full well that he has no intention of going to that field. Indeed, perhaps the most honest thing some of us can admit to ourselves about ourselves is that we lie. Some of us know that no matter how many resolutions we formed a couple of weeks ago, no matter what we told ourselves about how we were going to change this year, no matter how much we pretend to be dissatisfied with the under-utilization of our potential, in truth we are complacently comfortable with ourselves – even when we tell ourselves that we are not. We are comfortable with our habitual failure, comfortable with our lack of discipline and commitment, comfortable with our inaction, even comfortable with repeated resistance to God's will and way. In truth our lack of real resolve feels as good to us as an old sweatshirt. We tell ourselves – and we tell others, "Sure, I'll volunteer, I'll be disciplined. I'll change!" But there is a part of us that knows we don't mean a word of it, even as we say it.

Of course, the human heart is complex enough to admit of a middle possibility between outright lying and simply falling short of the truth. Maybe the boy had no intention of going

into his father's field – yet maybe he had no conscious idea that he had no intention of going. You don't think we are capable of lying to ourselves? Ah, but we are! We say we will do things that we have no intention of doing – but we don't consciously realize it at the time. We think that when we volunteer for a task or make a resolution that we really intend to make it true. But deep down we know that we don't intend to do anything to make those words come true. We don't intend to rearrange our schedule, don't intend to reorder our priorities, don't intend to make any substantial lifestyle alterations that would turn our promises into concrete reality. I think of one of my mentors, a brilliant man and an excellent preacher, who used to tell me that he was uncomfortable with his atomic Irish temper and that in order to be more spiritual he had resolved to calm his anger, extinguish it, be rid of it forever. In truth, those of us around him knew -- even if *he* didn't -- that he didn't mean a word of it. His temper was a bully stick useful for cudgeling the rest of us into submission. He really thought he was serious about conquering the great cauldron of anger within him, but those of us who knew him well knew that ambition, however worthy, was a lie. He just did not know it was a lie. He was lying to himself. He thought he was telling the truth, but he was not.

Much of the time when we say we will do one thing and then don't, we aren't telling a conscious lie. It is only that our 'Yes' is a shallow Yes, rooted in a shallow, puppy-dog desire to please others. People whose respect we crave ask us to do something and, wanting them to think highly of us, we say "Sure, I'll do that," knowing that it would make the person happy. We never look down the road to anticipate how unhappy they will be in the end when our Yes turns out to be a No. Sometimes God tugs at our hearts, and we know the divine call is asking us to make some sacrifice, to undertake some responsibility, to invest some talent and passion in a cause. We tell God "Yes, of course I will," because that's the only way to make that tug of conscience go away. Telling God 'Yes,' makes us feel good. In other words, we say Yes to others, even unto God, because we don't want to bear the weight of saying No – even when we know the real answer of our hearts is No. I think of the guy in the old Fed Ex commercial who answered the phone saying, "Send it to Minneapolis on Monday? I can do that! Have it in Boston on Tuesday? I can do that! Get it to St. Louis on Wednesday? I can do that! Be in Las Vegas on Thursday? I can do that!" Then he hangs up the phone and there is a moment of silence. Then he asks, "How am I going to do that?"

Maturity comes in being realistic about who we are and what we can do. Maturity is having a sense of one's limits and identifying the tradeoffs. Maturity of judgment recognizes that more satisfaction comes from doing one thing right than finishing six other projects half-heartedly. It is not that many of the Yeses that we intend to say are bad, they may in fact be quite good, yet we dilute the worth of one Yes when we say so many Yesses that we cannot fulfill them. So many of our Yeses are never turned to reality because they simply reflect our deep insecurity. Sometimes Yeses bubble up out of us, rooted in our immature wish that we could change everything we want to change, that we could be all things to all people. Often our promises and resolutions swell up out of our desire to make things the way we'd like them to be, yet even as we make these promises we know we will not fulfill them. I wonder, at what point did the son go to his father and say, "Dad, I said I would go into the field, but I can't." And what exactly would he be meaning by saying "I can't?"

Would he be saying that the father's request was too hard, a challenge too high and difficult even to attempt? There is no dishonor in attempting a great deed and finding it too much for us and falling short, then admitting, "I couldn't. I tried but I couldn't." But going into the field is no great and heroic quest. In this instance in saying to the father, "I can't," the son really means 'I won't.' What he really means is that there are other pressures and desires more important and influential in his life. There are quite a few times in life when we say, "I can do this," when we secretly think, "I can't." Our mouths say, 'I can do this,' but our hearts tell us, 'I don't really believe I can.' We make noble resolutions, then say, "I really can't stop smoking. I really can't stop working so hard. I really can't find devotional time to quieten my spirit. I really don't have time to mentor a child. I really do lack the courage to reach out to a hurting friend. I really can't keep my tithe to the church. I really can't fulfill that committee responsibility." And believing that we can't, we don't.

But here's the thing: all too often what we think is a matter of choice ceases to be a matter of choice. We tell ourselves, "I can't stay on my diet and I can't find time to exercise." Then comes the heart attack. Then comes the time when the spectrum of freedom in our choices is limited. Someone declares, "I really can't stop working so hard; I really can't regulate my stress." Then comes the sickness and the breakdown. Then the spectrum of freedom in our choices becomes limited. Someone says, "I really want to value my family more, but I really can't spare the time right now." Then comes the strain upon the marriage and the inevitable tension. Then the spectrum of freedom is limited. The reason we make extraordinary, good promises is because we know that these promises are good for us, and that there are consequences that will ensue if do not fulfill those promises. That is why out of our heart swell up resolutions of goodness and nobility. But words can only do so much.

We do well to remember who tells this story. It is our Lord, speaking to religious folk like us. He is saying, "You all think you are shaped by obedience to your heavenly Father. That is an illusion. More often than not, regardless of what you say to God, your behavior is shaped by your selfish impulses." Lying in bed early one New Year's Day, I found myself asking myself what kind of year I wanted it to be. What did I really want to accomplish? By year's end, what did I want to have achieved? I started listing goals, personal, professional, spiritual. Suddenly in that pre-dawn darkness the Word of God came to me in the form of a piercing, electric phrase: *Your true desires will shape you. Your true desires will shape your year.* That shocked me head to toe. Sure, I could go on and make my lists of what I wanted to happen, but God was saying, "What you really want to do is what you will make time for. What you really want to accomplish is what will claim your resources. What you will want to achieve is what will elicit your sacrifice. Your true desires will shape you."

Your true desires will shape you. Your true desires will shape your year. If your true desire is to grow closer to God, that desire will shape you, it will arrange your time and order your priorities, it will claim your life. If you desire truly to live a healthy life that desire will shape you, it will arrange your time and order your priorities, it will claim your life. If your true desire is to cherish your family, that desire will shape you, it will arrange your time and order your priorities, it will claim your life. If your true desire is to improve and enlarge this fellowship, that desire will orient the way you live. We seem to be a welter of competing desires, but in the end we will do exactly what we want to do, whether we realize that's what we wanted to do or not.

What we truly desire shapes us, like the arm of a tennis player that grows thick with practice, or the legs of a runner that grow sleek with mileage, or the belly of the guy who loves doughnuts. The more we do what we really desire, the more what we really want and do shapes us.

So what, as my children might say, is the big hairy deal here? So what?  
So a son told his father that he would work the fields but his true desires took him elsewhere. So what?  
Here is why it matters. Our Lord once said a very simple thing, very simple and very wise:  
You cannot serve two masters.  
You will either love one and hate the other, or you will serve the other and despise the one.  
The big deal about life and faith is  
that we either arrange our lives around the requests of the Father,  
or we order our behavior around what strikes our fancy.  
The voice we really heed is truly our God  
and is the One who will determine the pathway of our year.  
Our Deity can be the true God – or it can be us.

Ah, but the father's request to the son to go work in the field was such a little thing!  
Yes, but our Lord also said,  
"Those who are faithful in doing little things will be faithful in much.  
Those who are faithless in doing little things will be faithless in much."  
Going into the field is but a little thing –  
but our year will mostly be comprised of doing a series of little things.  
To say Yes to the Father in some little act of obedience and discipline may well  
prepare your soul to walk closely with God in all matters, great and small.  
Our heavenly Father comes to us and asks us to go work in the fields of service.  
Perhaps, in the safety of the sanctuary it is easy to say Yes.  
But when tomorrow comes, what desire will truly shape our heart?  
Will we do what we have promised unto the Father?

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