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He Said He Wouldn't -- But He Did Matthew 21:28-31

Truly the whole story of God would read differently if good people had not had second thoughts..
What if Moses had persisted in his resistance to God's call out of the burning bush to be an agent of liberation for his people?
What if David had acted on his first impulse to kill old Saul in the cave rather than simply cutting off a piece of his garment in a gesture of reconciliation?
Jonah vowed that he would never preach God's word to the Ninevites.
But he ate those words -- after God's Word sort of ate him.
How would the Christmas story read if Joseph had acted on his first impulse to put Mary away privately?
Wouldn't the list of disciples read differently if Nathanael had stuck to his casual dismissal of Jesus as the Christ, with a superficial, "What good can come out of Nazareth?"
What if devout Ananias had persisted in resisting the call of God to go lay healing hands on a blind persecutor of believers named Saul? If Ananias had not had second thoughts, perhaps our Christian story would have been bereft of the genius of a disciple named Paul!
Truly, the story of God has been immeasurably enriched by people having second thoughts.

First thoughts are not necessarily our best thoughts. Sometimes our first inclinations and the first words out of our mouths take us in directions that run contrary to our best interests -- and to the will of God.
Our Lord acknowledges this deep perversity of our nature by telling of a son who is asked by his father, "Will you go into my vineyard to work today?" The boy responds, "I won't! Absolutely not!"
But then, having refused his father, he has second thoughts.
He contradicts himself and goes into his father's vineyard to work. Why did he tell his father that he wouldn't go? And why, having said that he wouldn't go to the father's field, does he go?

I think I can answer the first question in two words: "Trip wires. Trip wires!"
A trip wire, you may recall, stretches near the ground and is attached to some kind of warning or weapon.
When the trip wire is disturbed, the weapon or warning is activated.
Imagine that along our nervous system lies a vast and intricate set of trip wires that when disturbed set off an instantaneous response within our personality.
Some of these trip wires plug into an instantly-positive response center.
Some of these wires root in an instantly-negative response center.
When I hear the words, "Georgia Bulldogs," I have an instantly positive response.
When I hear the words, "Notre Dame, Christian Laettner, Pat Robertson, or Rush Limbaugh," my blood pressure rises involuntarily. You have your trip wires; I have mine.
An external observer might regard our trip wires as absolutely arbitrary, but no one can deny that they help constitute who we are.

These sensitive trip wires instantly register stimuli and elicit our most bedrock convictions -- and some, I might add -- express our most irrational pet peeves.
That is to say, some of our trip wires root in the center of our being. Others are superficially grounded.
But these trip wires are with us and certain stimuli evoke our positive or negative responses reflexively.
In asking the son to go into the field, the father tripped one of the son's trip wires and he exploded, "NO!" Why? We don't know.
Maybe he was feeling that the father always seemed to abuse his giving nature.

Maybe he awakened that morning intending to rebel against his self-image as the obedient son.
Maybe he was feeling pressed for time.

Maybe he was planning to call a girl up and go on a picnic.

Maybe he just didn't like the way the father asked him. We don't know.

We don't know why *we* snap at the people that *we* love with words that we don't really mean, hurtful words of negativity that we blurt out before we think about them. Yet we do this very thing. Somehow the father tripped the son's trip wire when he asked, "Will you go into my vineyard?" and the son responded, "I will not!"

Then the boy turned around and went into the vineyard. Why?

Because this son was a creature of conscience. His brother was a creature of caprice.

His other brother, thought, "Well, I might go into the field today, I'll just tell Dad, sure."

Then he didn't go. He lied. His brother lied, too, but his lie is of the type that any parent will accept, because his lie signified the triumph of conscience over caprice.

This son has said to his father, "I will not go into the vineyard," but then he stopped to think, "What do these words say about the tenor of my soul?"

Upon reflection, he repented of his declaration and he went into his father's field.

He was a creature of conscience, not caprice, and upon reflection,

he conformed his behavior to that conscience, honoring a commitment that he knew to be right.

"Conscience" is a word currently in disfavor, fallen prey to the notion that it is only a construct of other people's opinions. Some say conscience is a derivative product molded by mores that aren't even moral.

Some say that conscience is no reliable guide to ethics -- just the consensus of the herd.

But conscience in its truest form is defined by loyalty, a loyalty to God, a loyalty to a sense of relationship to other people, a loyalty to some great truth, a loyalty to some high calling, a loyalty to a self-image.

A spiritual conscience expresses a loyalty formed by a sense of connection between creature and Creator.

Our conscience calls us to be obedient to our best self-image and to relationships that we know define us.

The son is defined by a sense of loyalty to the father.

His self-image is defined by a sense of obedience to the father's word.

Even though he has defied the father in saying, "I will not go into your field,"

his conscience keeps him from living the lie that he can truly live estranged from the father's word.

This son can tell a lie, but his conscience will not allow him to live one.

His conscience is a sign that the voice of the father has entered the son's own voice, so he can hear the father inviting him to go into the vineyard, even after the father has gone away.

Conscience calls him back to act loyally to the relationship that really matters to him.

I was talking about the son who said no to the father, then did the task he had rejected, and my wife Melissa said, "I can identify with that son. I'm all the time telling people that I can't do something, then I turn around and do it."

In truth, every year Melissa declares to our household,

"This year I will not direct the missions program on Wednesday night. It is just a thankless job."

Yet every year she ends up directing the missions program on Wednesday night. Why?

Because she is defined by a sense of loyalty to the God who has shaped her; she has a sense of relationship to the children of this church and their parents; she has a sense of self-image

as God's obedient daughter, so though when asked to do the task, her words are No,

her sense of loyalty calls her back to do the job again.

I remind you, our Lord is the one telling the story, and what he is saying is, 'When God's voice becomes a part of your voice, it alters your behavior, it rearranges your priorities, it reorients your being.'

What we call sin is an act against our sense of relationship.

What we call sin is usually an attempt to disrupt our true self-image as one who is trustworthy.

From the little boy who steals a cookie from a jar, to the spouse who violates his/her marriage vows, to the businesswoman who steals from her company, to the Christian who hides her talent from God,

most of our destructive choices constitute a betrayal of our sense of relationship, of our sense of loyalty, of our sense of trustworthiness, a betrayal of that voice inside our heads that says, "This is who I truly am." The more acts we commit against our true self-image, the sooner comes the time when we lose ourselves. The more we are disloyal to our own sense of self the sooner comes the time when we lose that self.

A wise man once wrote in his diary: "Ego is the guy who stands up in front of you at the horse race." What he is saying is, we aspire to see ourselves and the world rightly, but as we endeavor to do so, up stands the Ego, "the big I" – that is all we can see. All we see is our schedule, our ambitions, our frustrations, our anxieties, our fears. That's all we see. Ego, the "big I," blinds us from seeing the world and ourselves as we need to see them. Our trip wires, as irrational as they may be, as jumbled and contradictory as our desires can be, cause negative words and fierce declarations to tumble out of our mouths, causing us to think upon reflection, "I have to contradict those words to remain true to who I am." The more the voice of God becomes a constituent element of our voice, the sooner some of our trip wires begin to disappear.

How does all this work out in real life? Let me give you a hypothetical example. A wife calls her husband while he is at work, in the midst of something he considers really important. She says, "Honey, you've got to call the bank about renegotiating that loan, and only you can do it, and it needs to be done today." He says, "I don't have time for that. You do it, and by the way, while you are doing that, call the YMCA and check on their pool schedule." She snaps back, "I've got so much going on here at the house, I don't have time to call the YMCA," and he says, "I don't have time to call the bank." He hangs up. She hangs up. A few minutes pass. The husband begins to think of how his self-image is defined by his affection for his wife and how much he loves her. He thinks, "Hey, I have to climb in bed with this woman's cold feet on a cold night." So he picks up the phone and he calls the bank. After a while the wife thinks of her affection for her husband, and before long she calls the Y. When they see each other a few hours later he gives the information on the bank loan, and she gives the information on the pool schedule, and neither refers at all to the other's first words of refusal, for both know that those initial reactions did not reflect who they truly are. That's how love is supposed to work. That's where the water hits the wheel in terms of having second thoughts and contradicting your No to remain true to your best identity.

There is a line from *The Colonel's Christmas*, and though I can't say it as well as Kimberly Hicks did, it goes like this:

"One of these days I'm going to think about what my mouth says before my mouth says it."

A novel concept.

I don't know what your mouth has said unto God.

I don't know what your mouth has said to those whom you love and cherish.

But I do know that some of our first words are not our best words, that some of our first thoughts are not our best thoughts, and if we persist in these words and thoughts they will take us farther away from who we want to be.

The good news is, we don't have to persist in such words and attitudes.

The son told the father that he wouldn't go into his vineyard to work, but he did.

Often, the healthiest diet we can embrace is that of eating our words.

Perhaps, the more words we discipline ourselves to eat, the fewer foolish words we will allow ourselves to say. That's a thought to ponder as we reflect upon our relationship with God and each other and with our own sense of self as we enter into this new year.

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