

Text: Matthew 21:28-32. 19th Sunday after Pentecost. **October 19, 2014**

Surprise, Surprise!

Grace, mercy, peace. These are all yours from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – Amen.

I think that the world we live in is a *SARCASTIC* world. Especially today. This is just my *opinion*. It's just one word that comes to mind – *sarcastic*. What a profound way to begin a sermon, right?!! Would you like to hear some more of my awesome opinions? Good, good – how 'bout those Green Bay Packers!!? Vikings fans will love this.

But I do feel it's generally true. If you stop a moment...lots of sarcasm and cynicism and satire out there. It's in our newspapers, on the radio, even at our kitchen tables. So much of it, I think sometimes we forget its definition. **SARCASM: the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really want to say especially in order to insult someone, to show irritation, or to be funny.** For example:

"Boy, I love election season. It's neat to see how all the politicians get along – so much bipartisan camaraderie."

"Mom, I'm so glad we're having tater-tot casserole again! Twelve times in one month! Yay!"

A person's tone of voice certainly helps: *"Ah, Vicar Steve's preaching today...GREAT. Get ready to be confused."* ☺

But you see my point – I think ours is a society *saturated* by **sarcasm** - sharp, cutting expressions, witty, clever quips. And maybe it's just me. I'll admit: I'm *plenty* sarcastic. If you look at your worship folder, maybe you'll realize some *sarcasm* even found its way into today's sermon theme.

Surprise, Surprise...

This morning we're focusing just a little further on a short story told by Jesus, his *Parable of the Two Sons*.

The FIRST son did one thing; the SECOND did another... and the THIRD son? Well, I don't know about that, but we'll get there...

Now, while I might contend that *Scripture* contains at least a little bit of humor and perhaps small traces of sarcasm ... our Lord and Savior JESUS—master teacher that he was—didn't prefer to use it. Just look the Gospel lesson and see: Jesus starts off his listeners with the shortest of three scenarios. And he's not so much sarcastic—not at all—but rather: *sincere, straightforward, simple*. This is pretty typical whenever Jesus was sharing the message of sin and salvation. And that's all he ever did.

So it really shouldn't be a *surprise* at all, to anybody! Jesus was continually sharing something *special*. He was sharing *himself*, and speaking short stories that bear eternal significance for all people.

But somehow his parables still catch us by *surprise*... especially this one about these two sons. It's only five verses long, but there are several surprises stacked up waiting for us. God-willing, our Savior's words shake us into spiritual action. *Every* one of us is a son. **Surprise, surprise.** But now it's a matter of "Which one are you?" Are you the first son? The second? Have you had a change of heart? Have you hung up your Pharisee hat for good, having repented of your sin? Or... are we all merely pious liars, just a bunch of hypocrites who say all the right things? Talk is cheap. Maybe you and I are a little bit of BOTH! Which one ARE you?? It's important we give an answer.

"BUT WHAT DO YOU THINK?" The *first surprise* we encounter is, well, that Jesus would even pose the question! I mean, just... imagine it! Maybe it'll strike you this morning, maybe two months from now. Remember: God IN THE FLESH come down from heaven, casually conversing with the common man. You know how sometimes we picture ourselves "at the Pearly Gates," and we float the hypothetical question that comes booming down in the voice of God, and he asks us one at a time, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" Well... it had to be a whole different type of AMAZING to be standing in the temple courts talking to Jesus. How would it feel to have Jesus walk up to you and shoot the breeze? Wow. We don't have pictures or video footage, only books, artists' depictions of Jesus, and of course, THE book. But can we possibly imagine the artist's rendition of Christ literally jumping off the illustrated page and into real life and onto those dusty, crowded streets of Jerusalem? Just visualize Jesus, calmly telling the story.

He said: **"What do YOU think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'**

"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

So the father of these sons gives a command, and the command is *as clear as day*. It's urgent; it's effective *immediately!* The father comes a'callin'. How heartbreaking, then, is the first son's reply! He defies his father and flat-out rejects his dad's offer. "No! I won't go," he says. BUT LATER... what does it say? The first son changed his mind, and he went. In other words, *he repented*

of his sin. This first son represents every last person who is caught up in their sin, yet finally recognizes their condition and turns to Jesus. This is a pretty common thing, but it's no small thing...

This first son stands for an entire multitude of people that includes such notables as... the Prodigal Son, the wicked people of Nineveh, the many prostitutes like Rahab, the countless shady tax collectors like Zacchaeus (before he climbed that sycamore tree). All these and many more spent the greater part of their lives mired in sin. And they really didn't know any differently – often living life in the fast lane, hurtling down the wide road to perdition.

But something happened. The first son “changed his mind and went.”

Surprise, surprise. At least – so goes the *sarcastic* reaction to the first son's remarkable change of heart. Why is it that horrible sinners in the Bible frequently get a second chance? After all, this Jesus fellow made it a regular habit to eat dinner with tax collectors and “sinners.” But what made the “low-lifes” of society so special? And what could have happened to make them flip a 180 and do the will of God?

Like the first son, these people are sinners. If they have anything in common, it's their huge pile of wrong deeds. But there's something else they share: these people are *sinners who are sorry for their sins*. And it's not like they just flipped a switch one day and got their act together. No – God went to work. He went to work on their hearts. It was he who changed their heart of hearts. It was all God's doing when the first son “changed his mind and went.” The first son is everyone who repents of their sin and turns to their Savior in faith. No small thing.

But then, why didn't the second son follow through? Their dad's direction to *go* and *work* in the vineyard didn't change; **“the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.”** This second son – HE HAD PROMISE! He was the good little boy whispering white lies into his old man's ear. He was acing every oral exam ... yet he never followed through. Unfortunately, this second son was pretty much a “yes man” – a people pleaser. Once an eager beaver, now a big-talking promise breaker. His eloquent words, however well-intentioned, would only bring him so far.

Surprise, surprise. These are essentially Jesus' words for the second son whose words were always louder than his actions. Jesus was speaking directly to the puffed-up Pharisees, the outwardly pristine men of God who may have honored God with their lips ... but whose hearts were far from accepting Jesus as the Messiah. The Pharisees were not about to shed their self-righteous spirits in a few seconds. They weren't about to overcome their self-imposed slavery, their own spiritual cynicism, which had spread over their souls like some decades-old disease. These religious men who were able to fool friends and family about their faith...were certainly not fit to *go* and *work* for the LORD.

“BUT WHAT DO YOU THINK?” Which son are you? Could you be the second son? Could you be a Pharisee?

Well ... I think I am.

I don't know about you, but my parents and teachers spent so much time and effort drilling it into me: “DON'T BE LIKE THE PHARISEE. DON'T BE THAT GUY WHO STANDS UP IN THE TEMPLE, raising the roof of self. Even if it's not out in the open, just don't be that guy who harbors secret thoughts of “At least I'm not like that sinner over there.”

Well, the Pharisee inside every one of us is stronger than we realize. Don't you find it true: the harder you try to NOT be like someone else, it turns into a rank GAME of COMPARISON. “*At least I'm not like the Pharisee. I mean, I'm REALLY humble. I'll just be extra patient and wait for my soft pat on the back.*” Sometimes the harder we try to NOT be the Pharisee, the harder we try to avoid being that second son... well, it's already too late.

And it's so much easier said than done. Sadly, the Pharisees knew this firsthand. Their actions would never meet up with their words. They would never change their minds for the better. They would never repent even if John the Baptist had prepared the way, even if Jesus *was* the way, even if they knew the correct response when Jesus asked them:

“Which of the two (sons) did what his father wanted?” ‘The first,’ they answered.”

Definitely the right answer, but their proper words don't spare anyone the surprise of what Jesus said next: **“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”**

Surprise, surprise.

For the Pharisees, a horrible surprise. They refused Jesus at every chance they had, even as he rebuked them face-to-face. Jesus said: **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”**

But prostitutes were entering the kingdom of God! For God himself, this was a *wonderful* surprise (if that were possible)! While wise men stumble over themselves and their own sarcasm, God's words are still so simple, straightforward, and sincere – **“For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”** Just ask the thief on the cross about Jesus' smile on Good Friday.

What do you think? Do you think God leaves you out in his call to work the vineyard? **Don't be surprised.** This same Lord Jesus who casts down the religious hypocrite and spells out his doom also restores the contrite heart and seals it for all time. He desires that every son and every daughter *go and work* for Him.

Our Father in heaven knows that we ALL are not *strictly* Pharisees. He also knows we ALL are not *strictly* “second-chance” sinners. But rather, we have characteristics of both. Always quick to speak... yet fast to fall away. Bubbling with godly zeal one moment, cursing our Creator the very next. Both behaviors should come as no *surprise* to God's people. Because...it's a real *struggle* striving to do God's will.

“On the one hand,” you say, *“it's really hard to just NOT SIN. I'm HERE at worship and I go through the same routine of saying sorry to God for my sins. But do I really mean it? I don't know. It's been hard enough to create a good habit of hearing the Word, but to actually apply everything? I don't know if I can bear up, take it on myself to actually DO IT.”*

And you can't. On the other hand, we're all thankful everybody at church doesn't know just how prideful we can be. *“If I can just make it to Sunday – it's my Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card.”* “Besides, my sins could be worse.” Yet somehow the Pharisaical attitude settles even inside this space, as we sit in our chairs, all the same. That second son blurts out: *“I'm here, as per usual. What else do you want me to do? I've probably already volunteered my time – by the way, I could list two dozen individuals who hardly ever speak up.”*

At the very same time, part of us is shrieking out like the first son – **“WE'RE NOT CHURCH PEOPLE! I DON'T WANT TO BE FAKE! I'M NOT WORTHY TO SERVE ANYWAY!”**

And you're right.

You could almost call it *The Battle of the Two Sons*. Except... it's not the Pharisee pit against tax collector. No, the two sons in the original parable will not square off this time.

You and I will always realize our sin, whether we relate better to the *first* or *second* son.

Surprise, SURPRISE! There is a **third son**. No, not a combination of the two earthly sons, but a different son entirely. Yet this son has the same father. And you know him well, not to worry. Like a brother. And he knows you even better – he can relate to any which one of your worst struggles. This *third son* heard the same command, *“Go and work in the vineyard,”* and he didn't hesitate. He barely even said a word – he *was* the Word himself. The *third son* is **Jesus**. And he accomplished much. ALL his words and actions spoke loudly. **Jesus** is a *perfect son*, the perfect Son of the Father – he fully submitted himself to the Father's will and followed through wherever WE failed. His perfect obedience, the sacrifice he made to enter the earthly fray. Jesus not only went to work in a vineyard, yielding perfect fruits out of perfect faith. He ultimately yielded his perfect blood out of love for the *other two sons*. Blood to cover over the awful spectrum of OUR sin. Only the *third son* qualifies to save. Only the *third son* went to work in the vineyard, and he got it all done. One shot. **“Christ Jesus ... did not consider equality with God with something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”**

This is the simple, sincere, straightforward Gospel that stands tall at the end of the day. No need for surprises here, and certainly no sarcasm. WHAT DO YOU THINK? In the end, which son are you? It's not really the question. *Surprise, surprise.* **We are all sons and daughters of God through faith**—we find our identity in the *third son*—in **Jesus**.

And the peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus – Amen.