

Better Late Than Never
Matthew 21:23–32
Sunday, September 27, 2026

Let us pray: Speak to us, Lord, the word that we need to hear, and help us to follow in the way that you would have us go, in Christ. Amen.

When I was younger, I remember saying, “When I grow up, I’m going to be a *cool* parent! I will let my kids smoke and drink if they want to and stay up as late as they want and go out and do whatever they want.” I’m sure I’m not the only one here who has thought or said that at some point in life. But then we grow up and realize that’s probably not the best thing for our kids.

Or, “I’m *never* going to be like my parents!” And then you catch yourself sounding just like them.

“I’m never going to drive a minivan! That is so uncool!” But then you realize that it’s really just like an SUV, and there are things about it that are very practical and convenient.

Some people say, “I will let my kids have as much screen time as they want,” but then we read studies about the detrimental effects of that or we *experience* it firsthand. While other people say, “I’m going to *limit* my kids’ screen time,” but sometimes you just need them to be quiet so you can get some things done.

The toddler who screams, “I hate taking naps! When I grow up, I’m *never* going to take naps, and I’m never going to make my *kids* take naps!” And now what we wouldn’t give for a good nap.

Life has a funny way of changing our minds. Changing your mind isn’t always a sign that you were *wrong*. Sometimes it’s a sign that you have *grown*, that you have *learned*, or that your preferences have

changed. You have experienced life and found that a different approach works better. And just like *life* can change our *minds*, sometimes changing your *mind* can change your *life*.

Our scripture reading today takes place just after Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds welcome him as the new King of Israel. Then he goes into the temple, drives out the people who are buying and selling things there, and then he heals people who are blind or crippled. The Jewish religious leaders see him doing all of this, and they say to him, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” Basically, “Who do you think you are, and what gives you the right?!”

Jesus says, “I’ll ask *you* a question, and if you answer it, I’ll tell you. When John the Baptist baptized people, did his authority to do that come from heaven or from human origins?” The religious leaders are conflicted, because if they say, “It came from heaven,” then Jesus will say, “Then why didn’t you believe him?” If they say, “It came from human origins,” then the crowd will turn against them, because the people *loved* John, and that would be saying that John was not legitimate. So they say, “We don’t know.” They have a particular understanding about how faith is supposed to work, and they can’t change their minds about it. They aren’t open to the possibility that they were *wrong* about John the Baptist (or even worse, that they’re wrong about *Jesus*).

So then Jesus tells them a story. A man has two sons. He says to the first son, “Go out and work in my vineyard today.” The son says, “No, I don’t want to do that.” But then later, for whatever reason, he changes his mind, and he does what his father asked him to do. The father goes to his second son and says, “Go out and work in my vineyard,” and the son says, “Okay, I’ll get right on that,” but then for whatever reason, he doesn’t go. And Jesus asks them, “Which one of the two sons did the will of his father?” Well, easy answer. The first one. The one who actually *went*, even though he said he wouldn’t.

Then Jesus connects that story to the situation. He says, “Just like that, I tell you that tax collectors and prostitutes – *sinner*s – are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you, the religious leaders, because *they* are like the first son. They listened to John and changed their minds and their lives to do what God wants them to do. But you are like the second son who listened to John but wouldn’t change your minds. And even though you’re *saying* the right things, you’re not doing what God wants you to do.”

Typically, we understand this story to be saying that the kingdom of God is for those who do the will of God, regardless of who they are. This is not just about going to heaven after we die. The kingdom of God is when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. So if you are doing God’s will, then you are living in the kingdom of God while you are living here on earth. You could be a religious leader or a sinner, a priest or a prostitute, but if you do the will of God, then you will be living in the kingdom of God, and if you *don’t*, then you *won’t*.

And that’s a good understanding of this story. That God’s kingdom is open to *all of us*, no matter who we are or what we have done. We can *all* do God’s will and live in God’s kingdom. But it’s not what grabbed my attention over the past few weeks as I’ve been reading this. What grabbed my attention was when Jesus said that the first son *changed his mind*, while the religious leaders *did not* change their minds. And what I kept hearing coming out of this story is that it is never too late to change your mind.

The word Matthew uses here for “change your mind” is the Greek word *metamelomai*. It’s different from the word that *normally* gets used in the New Testament to talk about repentance or changing your mind. The word that *normally* gets used is the Greek word *metanoia*. It means, “to think again.” You reconsider something, rethink it, and change your mind about it. When the New Testament talks about *repentance*, that is normally the word it uses. But the word used here, *metamelomai*, isn’t just changing

how you *think* about something. It's changing how you *feel* about it. It literally means, "to change what you *care about*." The son thought, "You know what, I *care* about my father. I'm going to do what he asked me to do." When I said, "I'm going to be a cool parent who lets my kids do whatever they want," it wasn't just that I *thought about it* and decided that wasn't the right path. It's that I *care about my kids*, and I want what is best for them, so I changed my mind about that. Jesus is calling us here to *change what we care about*.

It's to shift from only caring about *ourselves* to caring about God and our neighbors; only caring about what *we* want to caring about what *others need*. And it is *never too late* to do that. It is *never too late* to change what you care about, to change your *mind*, to change your *life* and start living in the way that God is calling you to live.

A lot of times we don't *like* to change our minds about our attitudes or our deeply held beliefs or the way we're living, because changing our mind about something can feel like admitting that we were *wrong*, and no one wants to feel like they were *wrong*. So a lot of people will just double down and cling even harder to whatever it is they're holding onto, even if it isn't really *working* for them. But remember, like we said earlier, changing your mind isn't always a sign that you were *wrong*. Sometimes it's a sign that you have *grown*, that you have *learned*, or that your preferences have changed. You have experienced life and found that a different approach works better. Sometimes it's a sign that you realized you *care* about *something* or *someone* else.

Changing your mind can be a sign of deep humility and humbleness when it is saying, "I care less about *me* and how *I* feel than I do about making this right." And it is never too late to do that.

It is never too late to call someone up or go to them and say, “Hey, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I know that thing I said or did hurt you, and I’m really sorry.”

It’s never too late to admit that you have a problem with an addiction. Or maybe you don’t even think of it as an addiction; it’s just doing something too much that you know isn’t really good for you or helping you. It’s never too late to go to someone who cares about you – a spouse or a sibling or a parent or a child or a pastor – and say, “Hey, I need help.” People have come to me and said that before; you wouldn’t be the first.

It’s never too late to say, “This political belief that I held, or this thing that I supported, I thought this was right, but now I feel like maybe it wasn’t, that maybe this was actually hurting people, and I want to change my mind about that and start doing something *different*.” That is not a sign of *weakness*, it is a sign of great *strength*.

It is never too late to become a more patient person, a more generous person, a kinder person, a more positive person. It’s never too late to show people that you care about them; to say the things that you think inside or that you’ve wanted to say to them.

It’s never too late to forgive and let go of pain or a grudge that you’ve been holding onto.

It’s never too late to start praying more or reading scripture more or coming to church more or serving others more.

It is never too late to say *yes* to God and say, “I want to trust my life to Jesus and live with him as my Lord and Savior.”

It is *never too late* to start living in the kingdom of God, doing God's will for your life. Sometimes life changes our minds, and sometimes changing our minds can change our lives. But it's never too late for *either*. As long as you have breath in your body, you can start being the person God created you to be and living the life God is calling you to live. Better late than never.

There is a poem that I love by a poet named Portia Nelson. It's called, "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters." There are five sections to the poem. The first says,

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in. I am lost. I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

The second says,

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I still don't see it. I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
It isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

The third says,

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it there, I still fall in.
It's habit. It's my fault. I know where I am.
I get out immediately.

The fourth says,

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

And finally the fifth one says,

I walk down a different street.

We do not have to keep living the same life, walking down the same street, falling into the same holes. Jesus is telling us this morning that we can start walking down a different street. We can change directions. We can change our minds. We can change what we care about. We can change our lives. Because in Jesus there is *grace* to start over. And it is never too late to open ourselves up to it. Better late than never. Amen.