

# ***The Best of Intentions***

Matthew 21:23-32

Over the past few weeks as Wendy and I have been cleaning out her parents' house, I've been dealing with some of life's perplexing questions. You may think this sounds fairly profound, but I can assure you it isn't. Instead of trying to figure out the meaning of life or our changing roles in the context of family transitions, I'm befuddled by things like,

- *How do bugs end up dead in ceiling light fixtures that are enclosed and sealed?*
- *Why are attics so hard to get into? Why are they the purgatory for things we don't use, but are unwilling to throw out?*
- *Why is it that whatever I take apart refuses to go back together in the same way?*
- *Why is it the one thing you need in the new house is exactly what you considered completely useless and threw away the week before?*

I could go on, but these are perplexing questions for me.

Of course, in times like these, I offset that with an appreciation for how so much had to come together in so little time. It has been a frenetic and complicated two months, with Wendy and I relying on people to come through for us under time constraints they wouldn't normally attend to. For a multitude of reasons, we are grateful for the endless help we have received.

However, as with any move or any other significant task, when you're relying on others, there are one or two who will make things

even more complicated and burdensome by agreeing to do something and then not following through on it. In a pinch, that's a problem. When you're under deadlines, when time is of the essence, things become very stressful when what you thought was being handled, in fact, wasn't.

Our stresses aren't unique. Everyone faces situations like this from time to time and, typically, they can be a bit unnerving, frustrating, irritating, and at times result in lasting resentment. Even though a legitimate excuse is forgivable, if you sense it's only because the guilty party wasn't being completely forthright or cooperative about their willingness to help, then excuses tend to sound rather hollow, as if they were...well, you know...excuses! Excuses usually sound legitimate only to the person offering them.

Now I'm not complaining, necessarily, because reliability itself is no guarantee of stress relief. As the case may be, if someone doesn't do what they've been asked to do in the right way or with a responsible, thoughtful, and considerate approach, then what they've done may not help at all. If everything has to be redone, or undone, it is more of a headache and annoyance. You almost wish they had just let things be, than to do something that runs counter to what you hoped the results would be. It's one thing to have the best of intentions, but if the results are exactly opposite of what were anticipated because they didn't know what they were doing, or the wrong methods were employed in the process, or an insincere or lazy attitude was expressed, then good intentions don't add up to be much help.

In essence, this is one of the usual talking points brought home in this parable in Matthew of the two sons. Briefly, I'll recap it. Two sons were asked to work in their father's vineyard. One at first refused to go, but then had a change of heart and went. The other agreed to do it, but then never got around to it. The punchline was, who fulfilled his father's wishes? Obviously, it was the one who actually went and did the work, even though at first he refused.

Traditionally, the interpretation follows this line of thinking, speaking to the matter of integrity: the good son was not the one who agreed to work, but who in the end was unreliable; the good son was the one who fulfilled his father's wishes, even though he gave him a bit of an attitude at first. Faithfulness and integrity, then, is following through on what one said one would do, whereas failing to do so expresses not only unreliability and rudeness, but also a lack of consideration and respect for the one who asks something of you. This is a message you may have heard from your own parents, or from teachers or Scout leaders, or from Dear Abby or Dr. Phil, even more than you'd hear it from the pulpit.

So was this all Jesus was trying to convey in this particular parable—conventional household wisdom for personal character development? Be responsible, be dependable, be a good person. Follow through on what one agreed to do for the sake of integrity and reliability! That certainly is one takeaway. It's helpful advice for us all that bears repeating.

However, most biblical interpreters aren't satisfied to leave it at that. So another way to look at this parable is to view it metaphorically. Many commentators over the centuries have read

this story as being relevant to two specific groups within the early church—Jews who already considered themselves faithful to God and Gentiles and “sinners” who were being brought into the fold of the redeemed.

Characteristic of Jesus’ critique of religious hypocrisy, the parable intends then to recognize the status of those who come to faith at some point and conscientiously choose to follow and abide by the teachings of God through Moses and the Prophets. In the same breath, Jesus effectively chastised the attitude of those within Judaism who didn’t practice what they preached or were lenient on themselves in following the commandments, yet hard on others. In effect, they only paid lip service to biblical wisdom.

This was a serious concern for Jesus, as evidenced by some of his remarks recorded later in Matthew and elsewhere:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them! Woes to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves!”

(Matthew 23:13-15)

This rather harsh critique would follow the line of thinking characteristic of Jewish ethics—that the test of faithfulness is in what one *does*, not what one says. James as well brings this point home when he summarized the opening theme to his letter with this: “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22).

If this is the point of the parable, then it is well taken. Religious hypocrisy has always been a serious problem, not only in the Judaism of Jesus’ day, but in every religious community, including the church.

Hypocrisy, conceit, and self-righteousness, particularly expressed out of contempt for others, are almost the worst types of self-deceit, because they are laden with a sense of divine right to judge others. The harm done to people for the sake of “righteousness” has always been one of the great moral crimes of history and humankind. So this parable, then, serves as a sharp condemnation, not only of personal unreliability, but also of religious hypocrisy. Don’t say one thing and do another.

That said, I find there’s something missing in these interpretations that underscores a more significant point. It seems to me that what Jesus said here isn’t unique or that you couldn’t find it in a multitude of critiques of personal conduct. So why did his message have so much power and authority behind it? What was he driving at that would result in his opponents eventually crucifying him?

The answer, I believe, is implied throughout the text, but shows up particularly in verse 32:

For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

What I’m focusing on is the term “righteousness” or the spiritual goal to be a righteous person. What does it mean to be righteous?

It’s a term that has fallen out of fashion in current usage, so it might not be easy to grasp. Yet, if I were to ask you for a definition of “righteousness,” I likely would hear terms like “religiously devout,” “morally pure,” “holy living,” “spiritually-minded,” “focused on the next world, rather than this one,” and so forth. As apropos as they

seem, they would miss the mark. Righteousness isn't a matter of being holy as a person; righteousness is a matter of being truly just.

In spite of the traditional religious connotation, both the Hebrew and Greek words from which “righteousness” is translated literally mean “justice”—being in right relation with your neighbor and with God (Heb: *tsedeq/ah*; Gk: *dikaiousune*). Neither word can be translated to mean personal piety or spiritual purity—a humble religious perspective might be implied, but never mandated. Both Hebrew and Greek terms for righteousness refer to any person living in a just manner.

Typically, “living justly” means being fair to others, being considerate of their circumstances and needs, and making personal sacrifices to balance the scales of justice. The righteous are those who will watch out for the interests of others as much as they are expected to look out for their own—a living out of the “fairness doctrine” and of living by the Golden Rule.

I underscore this point so we may further appreciate what Jesus was actually doing in this parable, especially in redressing the balance of interests in ancient Judea and Galilee, out of which we derive his teachings. Righteousness, in Jesus' world, meant living justly with one's neighbors and ensuring fairness in their world. That was a tall order in a setting where the odds were stacked against so many people because of poverty and a lack of social standing.

Jesus' primary critique of Judaism in his day was that religious leaders failed to represent what the biblical teachings called for. They protected their own interests in the Roman imperial world, while failing to do justice for those who were marginalized, unfairly

burdened, and left unprotected and vulnerable in their society. In fact, religious leaders were notorious for making things harder on them by shaming “sinners” and those who were poor.

But as Jesus affirmed from the prophets before him, righteousness was and is about being in right relationship with your neighbor in society, not just finding your place in a house of worship. It’s an act of social justice, not a religious appeal to piety! This is why the rich young ruler, Zacchaeus, the pious Pharisee, and a host of others discovered righteousness exacted a dear price they literally had to pay, whether or not they themselves were religiously devout. The rich, young ruler was told to sell all of his possessions and share the proceeds among the poor (Mt. 19:16-20). Zacchaeus, in his response to Jesus, volunteered to pay restitution and then some to everyone he had defrauded as a tax collector (Lk. 19:8,9). The pious Pharisee, who exploited the sins of unfortunate people in order to make himself appear more spiritually pure, was shamed for his self-serving piety (Lk. 18:9-14).

Jesus was following the lead of John the Baptist, whose call to repentance was harsh on the status quo, but his warning wasn’t about their relationship to God as American revivalists love to do. Showing up at the altar meant nothing to God; righteousness was expressed in the streets sharing their resources, being honest in their business dealings, stopping the cheating and fraud for personal gain, and the like. That was how “righteousness” was revealed.

Understandably, this was hard on everyone who thought they could be religiously devout and clever businessmen at the same time. Those on the bottom side of life were ready for a change in how the

world was organized and operated; they were attracted to the fruits of righteousness, whereas, those at the top were not. This speaks volumes in our top 1%-driven world.

None of this would rest solely on good intentions, or convenient excuses like, “we would do this if we could,” or “the injustices are not of our making.” For John, for Jesus, for the prophets, for anyone who is to be taken seriously as a spiritual authority, a moral, righteous life is expressed with tangible and just acts! Good intentions don’t count. Otherwise, the spiritual word lacks integrity; there’s little validity to the moral belief, if all one has to do is pay lip service to it. Frankly, if we’re not countering the way the world operates with its eyes on profits over the welfare of people, then we are not righteous! Righteous acts are those that deliver other people from their suffering and carry them through their pain.

Biblical righteousness is something we occasionally celebrate in our own society. A week or so ago, Wendy and I were reminded of this when watching Ken Burns’ documentary about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Of the many things that impressed me about the Roosevelts, I was struck by their remarkable ability to articulate a need and then act in ways that accomplished important things for this country in a time of great suffering.

Politically, many aspects of the New Deal were controversial, if not explosive, but repeatedly the Roosevelts succeeded because they had the courage and will to believe what they were doing was the right thing. It wasn’t a matter of doing something to appear concerned; they fought the good fight to do the right thing in order to improve the lot for millions of Americans. Honestly, I forgot how much FDR

frequently followed Eleanor's lead, as she had a tremendous ability to embrace human suffering and identify just causes and bring them to light for action.

What was especially revealing was how much of what the Roosevelts did had no direct benefit coming back to them. They were among the richest elite of their day, but instead of protecting their wealth and advantages—instead of looking after the interests of profits first over everything else, they transformed the role of the President and First Lady, advocating for programs that would benefit those who were economically vulnerable and often forgotten or exploited by market interests. They had their critics and still do, to be sure, but in my estimation they were remarkably righteous, in the truest sense of the word. They set aside their own personal interests and used their powerful positions to aid those who had the greatest needs in society at that time when there were few others to provide such leadership.

It reminded me that the best of intentions are those acts of righteousness that transform us and others for the better. Even today, we don't need more houses of worship in this country to prove the relevance and value of religion; we need righteous people to deliver justice and fairness in tangible ways.

The best of intentions are those that are followed through in dependable, reliable ways, with no excuses pardoning inaction or the failure to deliver. The best of intentions are those that recognize that to be close to the heart of God one must be close to the plight of those who suffer. The best of intentions are those that don't use religious or political excuses to confuse the situation or stop us short from doing

the right things in society to make things fair for everyone. That is the meaning of righteousness! This is the heart of justice!

When we fulfill our best intentions with concrete acts of love and charity, honesty and integrity, fairness and justice, then, in the eyes of God and biblical wisdom, the righteous acts we do matter not only in the present, but they remain with us in our legacies all the way into eternity.

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