

## INTRODUCTION

If you're currently looking for a job, you need to be careful when you fill out the application form. Here are some actual statements from job application forms. One person wrote, "I served as an assistant SORE manager." When asked about his education, one applicant wrote, "I went to school on a FOOL scholarship." One person wrote, "I am very DETALE oriented." Another applicant indicated, "I am a rabid typist." Another applicant boasted, "I was involved in RUINING an entire Midwest division." Another person was honest when asked the reason for leaving their previous job. She wrote, "Pushed aside so Vice-President's girlfriend could steal my job." And finally, someone was applying for a job with the federal government. There was a question that asked, "Do you favor the overthrow of the United States government by force, subversion or violence?" They didn't know it was a "yes or no" answer, they thought it was multiple-choice, so they wrote: Violence.

If you were filling out an employment form and one of the questions was: Do you consider yourself a BAD person or a GOOD person? There are only two choices and there is no room to add an explanation. Which box would you check? Bad or good? Well, it all depends on your perspective. Are you comparing yourself to everyone else, or to God? When you compare yourself to a serial killer, or a bank robber, you may think you're pretty good. But in relationship to a Holy God, we are all bad and we must admit we need a Savior to transform us from our badness to His righteousness.

As we read this passage, don't forget these encounters occurred during the week leading up to the cross. These are some of the last teachings Jesus left us. In the next few messages we'll see Jesus is drawn into a verbal face-off with the chief priests and elders. I'll just call this group "religious snobs" for short.

Matthew 21:28-32. "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. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?' 'The first,' they answered. Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.'"

Do you remember some of the early Western motion pictures? It was always easy to tell the good cowboys from the bad cowboys. The heroes always wore white hats and the villains wore black hats. The difference was as easy to tell as black and white.

During the ministry of Jesus, the Pharisees and the Chief Priests thought they wore the white hats—they were the good guys. They kept the law of God and lived a life characterized by acts of righteousness. The other people were the bad guys—especially the worst of the worst—prostitutes and tax collectors. But Jesus irritated the religious snobs by telling them that it's easier for a bad person to get into heaven than for a good person. Do you know why it's easier

for a "bad" person to get into heaven than a "good" person? Simple answer: because NOBODY is good. Only God is good. The Bible says in Romans 3:12, "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." A "bad" person is quick to admit they need salvation, whereas a "good" person often thinks they're already good enough.

Someone said each of Jesus' parables is like a window. You can look through the parable and see the world in a different way. But if you really look at a window instead of through it, you will often catch your own reflection in the glass. When you truly "get it" you'll always see yourself in the parables of Jesus. There are two sons in this parable. As we unpack this parable, be looking to see which son best describes your life in relationship with your Father.

### **(1) THE REBEL: Even if you've resisted God, you can still repent and obey Him**

This first son was in open rebellion to his father. The dad said, "Son, I need you to go work in my vineyard." The son said, "No can do, dad. I've got tickets to hear the Screeching Camels in concert tonight in Bethlehem." But then as he thought about his dad and the need in the vineyard, he ended up giving his tickets to a friend and then headed straight toward the vineyard and started working.

Initially, this son was disobedient to his father, but then he changed his mind. There's another word for that: Repent. He was going in one direction, away from his father's plan, and then he changed his mind and turned around and followed his father's instructions. This is a clear picture of how repentance is necessary for salvation. When Peter was preaching on the Day of Pentecost the people were convicted of their sins and they asked Peter what to do. He said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (Acts 2:38)

This son represents a "bad" person who lives much of their life in rebellion against God. Then at some point they realize they are lost and they change their mind about God. They turn around and start following God's plan. They repent. In Jesus' day, the prostitutes and tax collectors who were repenting fit this category. Do you suspect that you may be like this son?

Are you someone who is searching for something in life that you can't quite describe? You know there is more to life than just a daily existence of going through the same routine over and over. As I look at our American culture today, I see so many young people who are searching for something.

Katy Perry is a pop singer who grew up in a Christian home, the daughter of a pastor. Her first album was Christian music under her real name, Katy Hudson. She's in a different world now. In one of her current songs she touches on this feeling of emptiness that pervades our culture. These words may express her spiritual frustration as well. She sings: Do you ever feel like a plastic bag; Drifting through the wind; Wanting to start again? Well, if you do, Jesus says you can be born again. Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin; Like a house of cards; One blow from caving in? If you feel that way, Jesus can give you a foundation for living that a hurricane can't destroy. Do you ever feel already buried deep; Six feet under screams; But no one seems to hear a thing?

Katy's answer to those questions is that you can be a firework, ignite the night and go, "boom, boom, boom." It's a cute song, and it asks some great questions, but Katy, you gave the wrong answer! The answer isn't to become a firework; it's to become a follower of Jesus. The only true satisfaction you'll find in life is in a personal relationship with Jesus. One of the early Christian pastors from North Africa, Augustine, wrote, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

So even if you've been rebellious against God for most of your life, there is still time for you to change your mind, repent, and follow God's plan for your life. God is waiting for you to repent and turn to Him today. The Bible says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

He is patient with you today, but the time will come when His patience will be exhausted. When Jesus comes, or after you die, you will no longer have the opportunity to repent. So learn the lesson from son #1. Even if you've said, "No" to God before, there's still time for you to change your mind.

## **(2) THE UNRELIABLE: Your promises to God mean nothing unless you follow through with obedience**

The father came to son #2 and said, "Son, I need you to go work in the vineyard." Son #2 said, "Yes sir! You got it, dad! You can count on me!" But then one of his friends said, "I've got tickets to the Tiberius Tigers game, want to join me?" Son #2 thought, "The grapes can wait. Dad will never know. And after all, my brother isn't working." So instead of obeying his father, he did his own thing. Jesus doesn't tell us if he intended to work, and got distracted, or if he was being secretly rebellious. We just know he was unreliable—he made a promise that he didn't keep.

He represents a "good" person who outwardly seems to be full of promises of faithfulness to God, but inwardly, there is rebellion and disobedience. In Jesus' time, this son represented the religious snobs to whom Jesus was talking. They were punctilious in their outward religious observance, but their hearts were cold and dead.

Today this son represents religious people who consider themselves to be good. They make a lot of promises to God, but they never get around to obeying Him. It's easy to confess you are a Christian, but the truth of your confession is revealed if you follow through with obedience to God.

In sports, the follow-through is an important motion. In tennis, a good follow-through on a groundstroke is the key to a good shot. In golf, the follow-through determines whether you hit a good shot or a bad shot. I've played a few rounds of golf with Brad Weesner who once played on the Nationwide Tour. I once asked him what was his key thought when he hit the ball. He said he was only concentrating on his follow through, where he wanted the club to end up *after* he hit the ball. I had to smile when he told me that, because I didn't think I had ever ONCE thought about

my follow through. Like golf and tennis, in the Christian life, it's the follow through that counts—and the follow through is obedience.

Jesus said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46) There are many people who profess to be Christians, but there is very little evidence in their lives. They make promises, but there is no performance. Imagine that you go to work for a new boss and he says, "Take out the garbage." And you say, "No, Boss." The boss says, "Go copy these papers." And you say, "No, Boss." That boss is going to say, "Why do you call me 'Boss, boss' and do not do what I say?" You're fired.

When Jesus finished this story He asked the listeners which son did what the Father asked. They said, "The first son." The first son's words were wrong but his heart was right. The second son's words were right but his heart was wrong.

What's the point of the parable? Sometimes those who look right (religious snobs) are actually very wrong. And sometimes those who look wrong (prostitutes and tax collectors) are very right. This parable made the religious snobs so angry you can understand why they would be calling for Jesus' arrest and death in a few days.

Which of these two sons best describe your attitude toward God? Can you relate to the rebel-son #1 who said, "No" but then obeyed? Or do you related to the unreliable-son #2 who was full of promise, but didn't obey? Neither of the sons was perfect. For the sake of application, let's imagine there was a third son. The father came to son #3 and said, "Go work in my vineyard." This son said, "Yes sir." And then he went and worked in the vineyard. Let's aim to be like son #3! Let's tell the Lord we will obey Him, and then let's follow through with obedience.

### **(3) THE COMMAND: Go into the vineyard (world) and bring the "outcasts" to receive God's forgiveness!**

The religious snobs shuddered with revulsion when Jesus was so bold as to say that prostitutes and tax collectors could even enter the Kingdom of heaven. And they shook with anger when He said they would enter *before* they would. The King James Version calls these two groups publicans and harlots. Both represented people who had sold out their dignity. A prostitute sold her body to a paying customer. A publican sold his soul to the Roman government, and extracted excessive money from his Jewish brothers. They were both considered to be the dregs of society.

There is plenty of evidence in the Bible that prostitutes can repent. In fact, there are two former prostitutes listed in the Messianic lineage of Jesus: Rahab and Tamar. Come on, go ahead and admit it. Don't you feel a little uncomfortable even hearing the words "prostitute" or "harlot" mentioned in a church service? And Jesus even had a former publican as one of his disciples. Levi, or Matthew, was once a despised publican, but he repented. By the way, you know what you call a publican who repents? A republican, of course!

God is still opening His arms to prostitutes, tax collectors, drug abusers, alcoholics, abusers, liars, and cheats because they know they need a savior. But, how much welcome do these kinds of people receive from the church of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Author Greg Boyd commented on this parable and asks a good question: Are the prostitutes and tax collectors of our day attracted to our churches or repelled by us? Jesus was known for the scandalous way he loved. Today, rather than viewing themselves as "the worst of sinners," (as Paul claimed), many Christians view themselves as the morally superior guardians of society who will protect it from those they judge to be "the worst of sinners." So instead of being known as outrageous lovers, Christians are largely viewed as self-righteous judges. (Myth of a Christian Religion)

At Green Acres most of us would say we welcome ALL kinds of people. There are no "outcasts" in God's eyes. But those the world calls outcasts aren't breaking down the doors of the church to get in. It's probably because they think they'll be condemned. So it's our job to head out into God's vineyard and bring them to hear the message of the gospel of grace.

In Luke 12 Jesus told another parable about the Kingdom of God. He said it was like a big party that a rich man threw. He sent invitations to the VIPs in town (religious snobs), and they all turned him down. But the host, who represents God, sent out his servants to bring in the people from the wrong side of the tracks. Jesus said, "Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.'" (Luke 14:21-23) I don't think God plays poker, but He does love a full house. Do you know that God wants to fill up His house with all kinds of people? Do we really communicate to all kinds of people that they are interested? Do we go out into the roads and country lanes and lovingly compel them to come in?

Appearances can be deceiving. Pastor Brian Le Croix tells the story of a girl who brought her boyfriend, Steve, to church for the first time. He had long hair, and piercings and probably a few tattoos. The greeter in the foyer of the church was dressed in his three-piece suit and said to Steve, "Young man, you are an abomination in the eyes of God."

Steve had never been to church before so he didn't speak the language. He had no clue what "abomination" meant. He thought it was maybe like "awesome." So he smiled and said, "Thanks, dude." to the rude usher.

Steve was an outcast in that man's eyes, but he wasn't an outcast to God. Steve heard the good news of forgiveness and he repented of his sin. He came to know the Lord and he married his girlfriend. They both felt called into full time Christian service. Pastor Le Croix reports that Steve and his family have just completed two decades of missionary work.

The reason it's easier for bad people like Steve to get into heaven than for that good greeter is that Steve recognized he was a sinner. Religious snobs like to tell sinners, "When you clean up your act, then you can come to my church." Religious snobs say, "When you cut your hair, and stop smoking and drinking, and stop using profanity, and buy the right kind of Bible, then we will start thinking about letting you belong to our holy group."

But those of us who embrace the gospel of grace say, "Whosoever WILL may come." We say, Come *just as you are*—we accept you as you are, and we believe Jesus will change you. Jesus told us to be fishers of men. He said, "You catch 'em, and I'll clean 'em!"

## CONCLUSION

God is still welcoming prostitutes and publicans into His kingdom. Iris Blue grew up in Houston, Texas. She lived a rebellious life and got involved in drugs, alcohol and prostitution when she was a teenager. When she was seventeen she was arrested and spent seven years in prison. When she got out of prison, she went back to the streets. She was part of the Banditos motorcycle gang, addicted to heroin and had numerous abortions. As she grew older, she graduated from being a prostitute to being a pimp. Her "office" was a topless bar in a sleazy part of Houston.

One of her former clients became a Christian. He was radically transformed and started witnessing to Iris and others who were still in that destructive lifestyle. He visited Iris at the bar and told her she needed Jesus. She cussed him out. He called her up and told her how much God loved her, and Iris hung up on him. One day he called and asked her to meet him outside the bar. That night he told her he couldn't see her anymore because he had made a commitment to God that he wasn't going to hang around with tramps anymore. Let me pick up the story at this point in Iris' own words:

"When he called me a tramp, I wanted to cut his throat. I thought, 'All this week you've been calling me and telling me how precious I am to God and that I was valuable. And now in one word, I was garbage.'

But before I could strike back he said, "You don't even understand, Jesus can turn you into a lady." When he said the word, "lady," it was like something just exploded inside me. And I thought, "All I've ever wanted to be was a lady."

He said, 'You see, it's really like a marriage—it's not just believing. Because if just believing in Jesus would save you, you would have been saved when you first heard about Jesus. But it's a commitment of your life to Him, saying, 'I give you me.' It's not just a one-way street. Jesus gets all of you and you get all of Him. Are you ready?'

I said, "I'm ready." He said, 'Okay, I'm going to lead you in a prayer, kind of like a wedding. And He said, "Jesus, do you want her?" I didn't hear nothing, but he said, "Jesus said, 'I do.'" And then he said, "Iris, do you want Jesus?" And I said, "I do."

We knelt there on the sidewalk. Nobody was playing, 'Just as I am.' But it was like I could feel the music on my knees. He said, 'Pray with me.' Then he took my hand and led me in that prayer. It was like God pulled back a curtain on my heart. And on March 31, out in front of an old bar, I knelt down a tramp, a loser, and a zero. And I stood up a lady, clean pure forgiven, innocent, blameless, cherished, brand new. My life was different."

Iris Blue trusted Christ that night, and since then has lived for the Lord. She lives in Murchison, Texas with her husband Duane, and they serve the Lord full time. She spoke here at Green Acres

about 15 years ago. Her testimony has been put into a book entitled, *Iris: Trophy of Grace*. Can God still save prostitutes and tax collectors? Absolutely. But Iris thanks God every day that someone loved her enough to be willing to come down to the bar and share God's message of hope and forgiveness with an "outcast."

You may think you're too good to take the Gospel to bad people like that. Well, that's too bad, because for bad people the Good News seems too good to be true—but that's why bad people consider it to be good news!

## OUTLINE

(1) THE REBEL: Even if you've resisted God, you can still repent and obey Him

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." 2 *Peter* 3:9

(2) THE UNRELIABLE: Your promises to God mean nothing unless you follow through with obedience

Jesus said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" *Luke* 6:46

(3) THE COMMAND: Go into the vineyard (world) and bring the "outcasts" to receive God's forgiveness!

Jesus said, "Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.'" *Luke* 14:21-23

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes



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*David O. Dykes, Pastor  
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