

TWENTY SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2026

The elder brother in today's Parable from chapter 21 of St. Matthew's Gospel was not, I think, deliberately lying to his father. In any case, the Lord Jesus does not indicate that the elder brother changed his mind. All He says is that the elder brother did not help his father, as he said he would. The younger brother refused to help his father; but the Lord says explicitly that he actually did change his mind, and join his father. In the second case we have a definite change of mind for the better. In the first case we have no change of mind at all.

The elder brother did not, I think, change his mind. He said "yes, sir," sincerely, because that was how he felt at the moment. Once the momentary enthusiasm passed, he fell back into his habitual laziness, and did not go. Settled habit trumps momentary enthusiasm.

Settled habit trumps momentary enthusiasm. We make promises to God that we do not fulfill not because we are insincere at the moment we make our promise, but because our settled habits go against the promise.

A rush of religious feelings is not a bad thing, but unless it helps build up religious habits, it is ultimately useless. Over three decades of ministry, I have come to think of this as the youth ministry problem. I have seen many youth ministry programs succeed in presenting events that get youth excited about religion. I have seen only a few that have succeeded in building up religious habits.

Of course, the gap between good feelings and good habits is hardly a problem just for young people. There are many people of every age group who feel an impulse to do something good and generous, and never do it. This, I insist, is not really insincerity. The feeling is sincere. The problem, quite often, is that the person is simply unable to follow up on that impulse.

Unable! Someone in a moment of religious enthusiasm forgets that gap between feeling and doing. He assumes that he can act the day after tomorrow according to his feelings of today. Apart from a miracle of Grace - and those can occur - he is wrong. He is simply not as free as he thinks he is. He is clogged with various worldly and sinful habits, so to speak, but does not know that he needs a plumber. He cannot do the good that he sincerely wants to do at this moment until he lets the Plumber go to work in him.

Our Salvation comes through Faith, undoubtedly. The Sacred Scriptures are quite clear about that. But what is meant by that word "Faith?" What is Faith, and how can someone tell that he or she has it? Someone might say - indeed, I have heard people say - that Faith is a conviction about being a sinner, trust in the saving power of Jesus Christ, and a warm love for Him in one's heart. These things are part of Faith, but not all of Faith. In chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel the Lord Jesus, in the Parable of the Talents and in the Judgement of the Nations, warns that good deeds are necessary for Salvation - whatever you did (or didn't) do for the least of My brethren, you did (or didn't) do for Me. Faith is not only feeling. Faith is also doing. The Catholic Church has traditionally insisted that we are saved by Faith and by good works, but this is not because any good works by themselves have any power to save anyone. This is because true Faith is about doing, not only about feeling. In his Epistle, St. James warns that Faith without works is dead. St. James is not going against St. Paul, who insists on Salvation through Faith. St. James is reminding us - and we definitely need the reminding - that Faith is a living reality that actually does things. "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so Faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:26) If by the word "Faith" someone means not only

conviction and feeling about Jesus, but also habitual obedience to Jesus, then we can truly say that we are saved by Faith. Faith includes the obedience of good works. Otherwise, we are too much like the elder brother of today's parable, saying "yes, sir" sincerely enough, but never following through on that yes. To have saving Faith is to have a conviction about Jesus as Lord and love for Him as Savior, but it is also to care for the sick, to give to the poor, to curb your temper, to forgive an enemy, to ask forgiveness for a wrong, to refrain from laughing at someone, and to put up with being laughed at. Faith, in the true sense, is conviction joined to habitual action.

The habitual good deeds of true Faith require constant help from God, day in and day out. Our hearts, until they are fully healed, easily betray us. That thought rightly frightens us; but there is One who perfectly knows our hearts, and He is at work, if we cooperate with Him, to replace our stony hearts with hearts of flesh, as Ezekiel foresaw, hearts that are fit and eager to do good. We can trust in His help. We can, and must, cooperate with His Grace in a daily routine of promising in the morning to do some good, and doing it before the day ends. This is not willpower, but a conscious cooperation with the Holy Spirit, our sanctifier and guide. Every day we struggle against our bad habits and satan, and every day the Holy Spirit will give us victory, if we call upon God and cooperate with His Grace.

As a practical point, we should start out making quite modest commitments to prayer time and charitable works. With God's help, we can prepare for fulfilling big promises by being faithful to our little promises, such as our Friday and Lenten penances. Those Friday and Lenten promises have no saving power by themselves, of course, but they are exercises that gradually correct our bad habits and, little by little, build up our strength for doing good consistently. They are minor, but not insignificant, expressions of Faith in action. In regard to God and to other human beings, we should only promise what we can be confident of fulfilling. At first, we cannot be confident of fulfilling much. Little by little, however, daily cooperating with God's Grace and the Spirit of Jesus, we become capable of fulfilling all that God asks us to do, empowered by Jesus to say to the Father what He did, "Not My will, but Yours be done."

Jesus Christ shows us how great human nature can become. Humble indeed about ourselves alone, we should not be humble about what we can do with Him. Even now, His Spirit is at work to renew our humanity, after the model of His humanity. Thus, we can afford to be hopeful. By true Faith, living and active, we can hope confidently to enter the Heaven of Heavens, and to live eternally in the presence of God. We can hope confidently for this, since Jesus Christ, Who lives in us through Faith, lives also with the Father of mercies, to Whom He draws us by cords of love.