

I presume that parents would understand very well this parable because they may have experienced it many times when they give a work to their children. A father has two sons and tells them to work in his vineyard. The first son says, "I'm on my way" and never goes. We can understand the disappointment and anger of the father. We can also understand the father's frustration when the second son says, "No, I'm too busy." But then he goes and does the work requested to him. We can appreciate as well the father's love and forgiveness to the son who finally followed through.

It is the difference between words and actions. We all know people who make a lot of promises but do nothing. Very often our words do not match our actions.

The Lord addresses this parable to the Scribes and Pharisees who were so precise about the Law but in their daily lives did not show the mercy and compassion God wanted. They are like the first son. Their words said "yes" but their lives said "no." Then, there were the outcasts who lived lives of sin but at John the Baptist's call to repentance, they changed. Initially they said "no" to God, now they embraced the kingdom life. Like the second son, they ended up doing the Lord's will.

We can apply this parable to ourselves in three ways.

First, how we actually live our lives shows what we really believe. Our actions, more truly than our words, show what we really believe and to what we are really faithful. A person may appear a devoted Christian who articulates well his orthodox faith yet live as an atheist. We show our loyalty to our friends, for instance, not by words but by standing by them in good times and bad and by reaching people in need. Our lives, more than our words, show what we really believe.

Secondly, in all of us there is a gap between what we profess and how we live. We all can say along with St. Paul in today's second reading that Jesus is Lord. But, is Jesus really Lord of our life, our social life, our professional life, our work life, our private life and our family life? Do we act as men and women who have really known Jesus? That is what conversion of life is all about. When we speak about "conversion" we usually mean someone joining a church. But it also means a more thorough embrace of what Christianity means. Often, it takes time to truly let Jesus be Lord.

Thirdly, this brief parable of the Lord about the father and his two sons is a parable of high consolation and of deep challenge to us. The example of the second son who said "no" and then went and did the work in the vineyard teaches us that a person's no can become a yes. Sometimes, for all kinds of reasons, people distance themselves from the Lord and from the Church. Then, at certain time or at a certain situation of their life, they gradually find themselves working in the vineyard, doing the Lord's work. Their no becomes a yes.

There is another, more troubling side to this parable. Like the first son, we can find ourselves going through the motions of prayer and performing the traditions of our faith but the substance of surrender and obedience is gone. Our yes has become a no. We can find ourselves going through the motions in marriage but the commitment to that one other person that should shape everything we do has evaporated. Our yes has become a no.

We can make great commitments to the Lord at Christmas or at Easter, or we can make resolution in following Christ after a strong preaching and when the time for follow-through comes, something for delay comes from our minds and we do nothing. Our yes can become a no.

We all can describe the problems of our world in some detail. The capital sins are alive and well. But what do we do in the face of such a situation? Do we endorse it, enhance it, amplify it, continue it, pass it on, or do we oppose it? Do we allow the world to turn our yes into a no?

Is our yes to Christ becoming a no in how we live? That is the haunting question of this parable for every one of us.