

Matthew's Parable of the Two Sons

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EDITORS' NOTE: Pages 421-424 of Gundry's **Matthew** (Eerdmans 1982) are here adapted, with the permission of the author and the publisher, to make them more readily available to our readers as a study in creative adaptation.

Mt 21:28-32 (Luke 7:29-30). The parable of the two sons is unique to Matthew and starts a series of three parables in the Gospel (see also 21:33-46 [the Parable of the Wicked Tenants] and 22:1-14 [the Parable of the Marriage Feast]¹). Not even the second and third parables, though they are paralleled, appear side by side in Mark or Luke. Each of the three deals with the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus. The plural number of "parables" in Mk 12:1, combined with Mark's providing only one parable on that occasion, led Matthew to gather three parables together.

The parallelism that typifies Matthew's style is evident in the parable of the two sons. "And approaching the first, he said, Son, go work today in the vineyard" (v28c) corresponds to "And approaching the other, he said likewise" (v30a). "And answering, he [the son] said" appears both in v29a and v30b. "I will not" (v29b) antithetically parallels "I will, Sir" (v30c). "But changing his mind, he later went away [to work]" (v29c) contrasts with "and he did not go away [to work]" (v30d). "Who of the two did the will of the father?" (v31a) echoes "But what do you think? A man had two sons" (v28ab). "They say, The first" (v31b) matches "Jesus says to them, Truly I say to you that the publicans and the prostitutes go into the Kingdom of God before you" (v31c). "For John came to you in [the] way of righteousness, and you did not believe him" (v32ab) antithetically parallels "but the publicans and the prostitutes believed him, and you, seeing, did not even change your minds later so as to believe him" (v32cd).

This sketch of parallelistic structure rests on a text-critical judgement in favor of the reading supported by S* C K W and others (see the UBS). This reading has in its favor the probability that the asking of the other son depends on the refusal of the first son. Furthermore, with this reading the first son turns out to be the last and the other, or last, son turns out to be first in accord with Jesus' statement to this effect and with Matthew's special interest in it (see 19:30 and 20:1-16). Support for the reading comes also from Matthew's fondness for ἐτέρω (5, 1), as opposed to un-Matthean δευτέρω. The latter goes with the variant reading, which may have arisen out of later application of the parable to Jews and Gentiles. That application demanded a reversal in the order of the sons to agree with the historical order of Jewish disobedience followed by Gentiles' repentance. See further Metzger ad loc.

¹[Paralleled respectively in Mk 12:1-12 || Lk 20:9-19 and in Lk 14:16-24 – The Editors].

Diction. Alongside highly literary parallelism, Matthew's special diction abounds:

τί δὲ ὑμῶν δοκεῖ (4,2), ἄνθρωπος (35,17; see comment on 13:24 concerning its general frequency in Matthew, and on 18:23-25 concerning Matthew's special use of it in parables); δύο (bis – 19,4; almost always concerning pairs of people, here concerning τέκνα; cf other unparalleled occurrences of τέκνα in 2:18, 18:25, 27:25); προσελθών (bis – 38,6); πρώτῳ/ος (2,5-6); ὑπάγε (5,6 – esp as an imperative); σήμερον (4,3); ἐργάζου (6,7 for ἐργ-) . . . Furthermore, the publicans' and prostitutes' entering the Kingdom of God looks like the uniquely Matthean formulae in 5:20, 7:21, 19:17.

The Prodigal Son. Apparently Matthew composed this parable (1) as a counterpart to the parable of the prodigal son and his elder brother, Lk 15:11-32, (2) in reminiscence of the distinctive parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Mt 20:1-6, and (3) with reference to John the Baptist in the debate over Jesus' authority, Mt 21:23-27. Since the Jewish leaders who challenged that authority lacked faith, προάγουσιν surely indicates their exclusive displacement, not merely their later entrance into the kingdom. The expression gives us an example of meiosis. The present tense of the verb probably implies entrance into the current form of the kingdom (cf Lk 16:16). In v32 the parable finally leads up to a revision of the tradition behind Lk 7:29-30, which Matthew replaced with 11:12-14 (cf Lk 16:16) in a discussion about John the Baptist (see 11:7-19 together with Lk 7:24-35). All in all, behind Matthew's composition and editing lies the purpose of highlighting the Jewish leaders' guilt.

We may detect echoes of Mt 20:1-16 at a number of points: the use of the root ἐργ- for the motif of work; the locale of the work in a vineyard; the use of ὑπάγω in the command to go to the vineyard; the use of ἀπέρχομαι in describing the going and not going; the division of the parable into chronological stages; the summarizing use of ὡσαύτως to qualify the action of getting workers into the vineyard; the identification of the owner with κύριος; the lack of a polite address on the part of the rebellious; and the reversal of first and last. The reminiscence of Mt 20:1-16 also anticipates the immediately following parable of the vineyard in Mt 21:33-46. Believing and not believing John the Baptist stem from the people's regarding John as a prophet and the chief priests' and elders' unbelief in John, just mentioned in vv 25-26. This assimilation to the preceding context leads Matthew to replace being baptized by John and not being baptized by John (so Luke 7:29-30) with believing and not believing John (v32). "For John came" (c32) echoes Mt 11:18 exactly (contrast the somewhat different wording in Lk 7:33). πρὸς ὑμᾶς harks back to προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ / ἔτερω in the parable proper. The contextual address to the chief priests and elders of the people determines the change of the third person plural (so Lk 7:29-30) to the second person plural. The several uses of ὁδός since the beginning of Jesus' ascent to Jerusalem (see 20:L17, 30; 21, 8 [bis], 19) combine with ἐδικαίωσαν "they acknowledged [God's] righteousness" (Luke 7:29) to make Matthew write ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης, which corresponds and refers to his portrayal of the Baptist as a preacher of righteousness. "The way of righteousness" appears also in Prov 8:20; 12:28; 16:31; 2 Pet 2:21; Jub 23:26; 25:15; 1 Enoch 92:3; 99:10; Barn 1:3, 5:4.

Typically, then, Matthew is borrowing a widely used expression from the OT. The borrowing will be confirmed by his inserting in v41 a further allusion to Ps 1:3, which concerns the way of the righteous (see Ps 1:6). The publicans come from Lk 7:29-30, but we read “the harlots” instead of the associated phrase “all the people.” Probably the latter phrase owes something to Luke’s redaction and rests on the crowd in the tradition (see Lk 7:24 and compare the concordance, sv *λαός* with Aland’s synopsis). Matthew’s previous and distinctive association of the people with the antagonistic elders (v23) would have forestalled a favorable reference to the people here. The rejection of God’s will in Lk 7:30 matches the behavior of the chief priests and the elders, who are represented by the disobedient son, remarkably well (though the term *βουλήν* “will” may come from Luke’s hand).

God. We might ask why Matthew writes about “the kingdom of God” instead of his usual “kingdom of heaven,” if he bears responsibility for composing the parable and its interpretation. The answer lies in the contextual need for the personal emphasis in God’s name. Just as in Mt 12:28 the contextual references to Satan’s kingdom and God’s Spirit called for retention of “God” with “kingdom,” so also here the contextual figure of the father, whose vineyard represents the kingdom, calls for use of the divine name (compare the v1 in 6:33 with 6:32). Compositional use of “the kingdom of God,” then, poses no greater problem than retention of “the kingdom of God” in traditional material. In other ways too, Matthew shows he is not limited to “the kingdom of heaven.” He writes of the Father’s kingdom (6:10, 13:43, 26:29), the kingdom of the Son of Man (13:41, 16:28; compare 20:21), the kingdom without qualification but in association with the gospel, righteousness, Jews (“sons of the kingdom”), the Word, and the disciples (4:23; 6:33 v1; 8:12; 9:35; 13:19, 38; 24:14; 25:34), as well as of God’s kingdom (6:33 v1; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43). Often these expressions are peculiar to his gospel. Therefore, it should not surprise us that in his own composition he uses “the kingdom of God” instead of “the kingdom of heaven.”

In sum, Matthew composes the parable as an illustration of the dominical saying we find in Lk 7:29-30. Earlier, he reserved that saying for inclusion in the present passage. Both his composing the parable and his reserving the saying have the purpose of emphasizing the Jewish leaders’ guilt. Like the first son, the publicans and prostitutes repented at the preaching of John the Baptist after exhibiting carelessness toward the law. Like the other son, the Jewish leaders refused John’s message despite their claimed allegiance to the law. The last line of v32 goes beyond the parable in noting that the Jewish leaders added guilt upon guilt by failing to change their minds even when given a second chance – probably a reference to Jesus’ ministry. This progression beyond the parable assimilates the ministries of Jesus and John both in the shifting of believing publicans and prostitutes from Jesus to John and in the making of Jesus’ ministry a renewal of the opportunity granted in John’s ministry. Indeed, putting John “on the way of righteousness” has already brought him alongside Jesus the Teacher of Righteousness (see esp Mt 5:17-48). That such assimilation typifies Matthew’s theology sets the seal to composition by him.