

GOOD INTENTIONS
A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
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Bryn Athyn, PA

“A man had two children, and coming to the first he said, Child, go, work today in my vineyard. And he answering, said, I am not willing; but afterwards, being remorseful, he went. And coming to the second, he said likewise; and he answering said, I [go], lord; and went not.” (Matthew 21:28-30)

There’s a well-known saying, that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But it’s not entirely clear what this means. Perhaps it means that it doesn’t matter whether you hoped good would come of your actions – if your actions were harmful, they will take you to hell. Or maybe in this context, “intentions” mean all the things we say we’re going to do but never get around to actually doing. And maybe the expression is simply incorrect – maybe the road to hell is NOT paved with good intentions.

The teachings for the New Church have mostly positive things to say about good intentions. *Conjugial Love 527* says, “[Angels] regard everyone in the light of his purpose, intention or end, and make distinctions accordingly; and that they therefore excuse or condemn those whom the end either excuses or condemns.” Our intentions, in this sense, are the primary thing that excuses or condemns us. But that brings us to the fundamental question for today, which is, what does it mean to intend something, either good or evil? We’ll explore this question through the lens of the Lord’s parable of the two brothers, which we read as our second lesson.

The Lord told this parable to the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem, during His last week of life on earth. These religious leaders had challenged the Lord’s authority; He had responded by asking where John the Baptist’s authority came from, knowing that these leaders had rejected John but feared the people, because the people thought of John as a prophet. These chief priests and elders, who knew the Scriptures better than the common people, seem to have thought of themselves as morally superior to the common people, certainly superior to the sinners who tended to congregate around the Lord.

So the Lord told this parable. A father came to the first of his two sons and asked him to go work in the vineyard. A vineyard was a familiar image for the Lord’s kingdom, and so this is a picture of God calling His people to do His will, His work. But the first son said, “I am not

willing,” and would not at first do the work. Later, though, despite this lack of willingness, though, this first son has a change of heart, and later did as his father commanded.

Meanwhile – presumably before the first son had changed his mind – the father approached the second son and asked him also to work in the vineyard. The second son eagerly agreed – but he did not actually go to do the work.

The parable does not directly tell us the *intentions* of either son, but we can get some sense of what they might have been. Looking first at the first son, the words of his response are important. Some translations render his reply to his father’s request as, “I will not,” but the Greek text actually says, “I am not willing,” “I do not will it” – that is, “I don’t want to.” There was something in the son, for whatever reason, that simply did not want to do the work he was being called to. And yet it becomes evident later that there was something else in him that would be stirred from which he *was* willing to do the work.

We all have multiple, sometimes conflicting, desires within ourselves. When we are looking at our intentions, it’s vital for us to keep in mind that our *desires* are not the same thing as our intentions. Every one of us is born into a corrupt will that *does not want* to shun evils as sins, that wants to continue to act selfishly. And we don’t ever rid ourselves of that will completely. But the Lord offers us a *new will* in which we *do* desire to obey him. If we don’t realize this fundamental fact – that we have more than one will – we can mistake our *attraction* for evil as an *intention* to do evil. But to *intend* evil means not simply to feel a desire to do it, but to make a choice to do it given the opportunity – to say, “If I can get away with that, I will do it.”

This is a freeing concept, because it means we are not defined by our harmful thoughts and desires. Our lesson from *Divine Providence* this morning puts it this way: “Nothing is appropriated to a person that he merely thinks, or even that he thinks to will, unless at the same time he wills to such a degree as to do it when opportunity offers” (*Divine Providence* 80). We intend something if we would do it given the opportunity. The book *True Christian Religion*, in its chapter on repentance, describes the importance of examining our intentions rather than just our actions. But examining our intentions doesn’t mean examining what we feel; rather, we examine our intentions by asking, “What would I do if I did not fear for my reputation or the law or anything else? What would I do if no one would know I had done it?” And when we make a resolution NOT to act on a harmful desire because to do so would be against God, we are ceasing to intend it, even if in our lower will we still *want* to do it. In fact, that chapter in *True Christian*

Religion says we *especially* repent if we find an evil delightful but choose to resist it when we have the opportunity (*True Christian Religion* 532).

This is what it means to act from that higher will, the new will that is from the Lord in us. This seems to be what the first son eventually does. At the conclusion of this parable, the Lord asked which of the two sons did the *will* of the father, using the same word that had been previously been uttered by the first son saying “I do not will it” or “I am not willing.” That son’s initial response came from his own lower will; his later regret and repentance seems to have come from acting according to the father’s will in himself.

So the first son, whatever his initial desires, clearly came to intend the right thing. What about the second brother? Again, the story does not directly tell us this son’s intention. Maybe he knew perfectly well that he was not going to do as his father asked, and his agreement was a knowing, bald-faced lie. But it’s reasonable to imagine this son thinking that he *would* do as his father asked. Remember, in this story this son stands for the chief priests and elders. These seem to be people who by and large thought of themselves as particularly scrupulous in following the Lord’s commandments. If this is the case, we can imagine the second son being similar to them, and fully believing of himself that he was the kind of person who *would* do his father’s work.

It’s instructive to look at his precise response. When his father asks him to work, his reply is translated as “I go, lord,” but in Greek it doesn’t say “go” – the son simply says, “I, lord” – maybe like saying, “Yes, I’m the one,” or, “Here I am, lord” or “Here I am, sir.” In some ways it’s the “correct” response to a call from God – we think of Samuel saying to the Lord, “Here I am, Lord” (1 Samuel 3:4)– but maybe it betrays an excessive focus on self. And although he uses a term of respect, we might hear echoes of the Lord’s words earlier in Matthew that “not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21).

In any case, this second son does not do what he said he would. Why would this be the case? Most of us can think of times we might have acted similarly – when we said we would do something, not *intentionally* lying, but also not being completely honest with ourselves. Part of what can happen here is the flip side of beating ourselves up for having negative feelings – we can think, “Yes, I have generally positive feelings toward following the Lord” and mistake those feelings for an *intention*, when an intention is a commitment to act given the opportunity. In our text from Ezekiel, the people are criticized for going to Ezekiel and listening, and even thinking

how good his words sounded – “as a doting song of a beautiful voice” – but not actually doing what he called them to do. We can do the same thing – we can hear a sermon or a class or a reading from the Word and think, “What a wonderful message! What great delivery!” – and mistake that positive feeling for a real difference in our lives, when that actually only comes about with a conscious decision and effort on our part.

To intend something is to commit to doing it given the opportunity. It’s good for this fact to challenge us and convict us. But there is a caveat – it is possible to genuinely intend something, but to be so overwhelmed in the moment that we fail to do it. The book *Conjugial Love* says of people who have determined to refrain from an evil because it is sinful against the Lord that “if they do evil unwittingly or from some overwhelming lust of the body, still this is not imputed to them, for they did not purpose it nor do they confirm it with themselves” (*Conjugial Love* 529). This is important to keep in mind both as we consider our own intentions and as we consider the intentions of others. We can look at someone else’s actions and think, “Clearly they intended evil, since they did not resist it given the opportunity.” But we cannot know to what extent anyone actually has that opportunity – there are a host of mental and physical factors that might make someone incapable of acting as they should. And the same is true of ourselves – there are times when, despite the intentions of our higher will, we fall pray to the allure of acting on our lower will.

When this happen, what matters is how we hold our actions afterwards – whether we try to defend them or instead admit that they were wrong, and recommit ourselves to acting differently in the future – with a prayer for help from the Lord.

That reality – that what matters when we fail is how we react afterwards – is reflected in the Lord’s explanation of the parable of the two brothers. In the parable, He was clearly linking the chief priests and elders of the people with the second brother, implying that despite their insistence that they would do God’s will, they had failed to do so. But their initial failure is not what He criticizes. Instead, he criticizes them for, *after* having failed to follow God, also then failing to heed John the Baptist’s call to repentance. He said to them,

“Amen I say to you, that the tax-collectors and the harlots shall go before you into the kingdom of God. For John came to you in the way of justice, and you did not believe him;

but the tax-collectors and the harlots believed him; and seeing it you were not remorseful afterwards, that you might believe him.” (Matthew 21:31-32)

They could have repented. What might have prevented them? Why did they ignore John the Baptist’s call to repentance when harlots and tax-collectors heeded it? It may have been because harlots and tax-collectors were used to thinking of themselves as sinners, and when John called sinners to repentance, they knew he was talking to them; whereas the elders and chief priests seem to have thought of themselves as godly people, and so maybe did not think John’s message as relevant for people like themselves. Like that second son, perhaps they assumed that, because they felt like the kind of people who followed God, their hearts and lives must basically be in the right place.

This is a trap we can all fall into. John the Baptist represents especially the literal sense of the Word; and if we think having good intentions means that, overall, we tend to wish well to people, we might miss the fact that Lord is talking directly to us in the literal sense of the Word, calling us to change in specific ways. We can imagine someone who tends to bend the truth thinking, “Well, I’m not meaning any harm by it – my intentions are in the right place” – and so when they read the commandment against bearing false witness, they think it’s for someone else. Or we can imagine someone who indulges in lustful fantasies and actions thinking, “There are people doing far worse things than me, and I’m still very respectful in the way I treat people of the opposite sex, and I approve of marriage as an ideal” – and so not realize that, in intention, they are breaking the commandments against committing adultery and coveting. When we think of good intentions as general good feelings toward doing the right thing – rather than a chosen *commitment* to do the right thing – it’s all too easy to ignore those calls to change our ways.

But we do have that choice. Like the the first brother, we might not *feel* like doing what the Lord is calling us to do. But the good news is that we don’t have to feel like it – we simply have to commit to do it. The good feelings come later. *True Christian Religion* 532 affirms this hopeful message:

If a person inquires whether he would actually commit [the] evils [forbidden in the Ten Commandments] if fear of the law and for his reputation did not hinder; and if after this scrutiny he determines that he will not will to do these things, because they are sins, he truly and interiorly repents; and still more when these evils are delightful to him, and he

is free to do them, and yet resists and abstains. He who practices this repeatedly, perceives the delights of evil, when they return, as undelightful, and finally he condemns them to hell.

Amen.

Divine Providence 80. Nothing is appropriated to a person that he merely thinks, or even that he thinks to will, unless at the same time he wills to such a degree as to do it when opportunity offers. This is because when a person does anything under these circumstances he does it from the will through the understanding, or from the affection of the will through the thought of the understanding; but so long as it is a matter of thought alone it cannot be appropriated, because the understanding does not conjoin itself with the will, or the thought of the understanding does not conjoin itself with the affection of the will; but the will together with its affection conjoins itself with the understanding and its thought.

This is meant by these words of the Lord:

Not that which goes into the mouth defiles a person; but that which goes out of the heart through the mouth defiles the person. Matthew 15:11, 17-18, 19.

By "the mouth" in the spiritual sense is meant thought, because thought speaks by means of the mouth; and by "the heart" in that sense is meant affection which is of love. If a person thinks and speaks from this affection, he then defiles himself.