

Showing up: Matthew 21:23-32

by [Roger Lovette](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

A missionary friend was scheduled to speak about his mission work at a distant church. He got up before daybreak that Sunday morning and drove 300 miles, preached at two services and spent the afternoon speaking with members of the congregation. As he was leaving that evening, the treasurer of the church gave him an envelope, which he tucked in his pocket for the ride home. It was very late when he returned home. As he undressed, he remembered the envelope. He turned on the light in the bathroom and opened it. Out fell a check with his name written on it in bold letters. Under his name were the words: A million thanks! It was signed by the treasurer.

Sometimes words are not enough. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees a parable about a man who had two sons. He sent the older son to work in his vineyard, but the son refused to go, then later changed his mind and headed for the fields. Not knowing this, the father sent his second son to do the work his older brother had refused to do. This son said he would go, but then changed his mind and never set foot in the fields. "Which son did the will of the Father?" Jesus asked. Which of the two boys obeyed?

The chief priests and the scribes knew the answer to that question—it was the son who headed for the fields. But Jesus interpreted his own parable for them. He told them that prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the kingdom before they did. Why? Because as religious leaders, the priests and scribes were known for their words, but were short on deeds.

As Christians told and retold this story, it dawned on them that this was more than an attack on the leaders of the synagogue. They began to see that the great danger was no different for them than it was for the Pharisees. They knew it was easy to say "Lord, Lord," but not so easy to do what the Father asked.

This parable follows on the heels of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and the moments when he cast the moneychangers from the temple, cursed the fig tree and asked the religious officials if they had accepted John and the baptism he brought.

All these events swirl around this parable. We cannot hold this parable at arm's length and shake our heads at the bad guys who ran the religious institution. This judgment is directed at all of us who claim the name Christian.

Are we the faithful or the unfaithful son? Both lied to the father. But one changed his mind and went to work while the other never followed through. Like the Pharisees we know the answer to Jesus' question—the son who did what the father asked is the hero in this parable.

Who among us, however, has not been like that second son? We all know how hard it is to keep the promises we have made. As Elisabeth Elliot has observed, "The problem with living sacrifices is that they keep creeping off the altar." We know about the creeping.

We would rather direct this parable to others. Lord knows we can point fingers. There are the right-wing Christians, the TV evangelists with the success gospels, the megachurches with their thousands. But this parable is addressed to us.

The world turns away from our wordy gospel. What stops those outside of the church in their tracks are those who have learned to move beyond the words. It isn't only the Gandhis and the Rosa Parkses and the Mother Teresas who remind us all over again what faith and commitment are all about. It's those medical practitioners in Doctors Without Borders who travel on their own time and expense to work in out-of-the-way places like Niger. They're told that the people they treat are too far gone, that they will soon die from malnutrition. This doesn't stop them—they do what they can do.

In every church I have served I still remember a few particular names and faces. Sometimes these are people who could not pray in public and were not comfortable teaching Sunday school. Some would not even serve on committees. Some had little formal education. But they were the ones with a casserole, the ones writing me a note when I needed it the most, the ones taking folks who didn't own cars to the grocery store, and the ones whispering as they took my hand at the back door, "I pray for you every day." Some living sacrifices do not slip off the altar.

My son sent me a bulletin from the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. One Sunday he stood in a long line of visitors to listen to Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school. He stayed for the worship service and sent me the program for the day. My eye stopped at this notice in the bulletin: *Rosalynn Carter will clean the church next*

*Saturday. Jimmy Carter will cut the grass and trim the shrubbery.*

It's not always the one who talks or preaches or teaches who reflects the will of the Father. Sometimes it is the one who shows up on a hot Saturday afternoon to dust the pews, take out the trash, cut the grass—making the world a little better for Christ's sake.