

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – September 27, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15 & 11am Sunday Masses – 775 words

The gospel this Sunday is a parable about two sons, but there is really a third hidden in it as well. The first son initially said “no” to the father’s command, but later had a change of heart – let’s call it a conversion – and ended up obeying. The second son said “yes” to his father, but then changed his mind and disobeyed; he took a moral step backwards. The third son, who is implied, would be the one who not only said “yes” but also followed through with his father’s command. Jesus Christ is the implicit or hidden third son.

As St. Paul said in the second reading, Christ “humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death”. It’s impossible for us to imagine our Lord being disobedient in anything. He always perfectly fulfilled the will of his Father, taking no shortcuts. But have we not, on many occasions, fallen short of Christ’s perfect obedience? From our outright disobedience to God or others at times, to our moral waffling, to our cutting of corners – in many ways there has been a lot of the first or second son in us, and not so much of the third.

But Paul exhorts us to “have...the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus”. He invites us to a deeper moral conversion, to that level of transformation where we would obey the Lord or other legitimate authority fully, promptly, and completely. But how do we get there? Perhaps we are even frustrated in our struggle to reach it – for example, finding that we have a similar list of sins in every confession; or praying for help from God in some area, but feeling like the prayer has not been answered and that nothing is changing.

Our failure to go deeper at times is due to the undisciplined, unstructured approach we take. For example, if we just pray that God will change us, we should not be surprised when our prayer seems unanswered, for he is not often inclined just to “zap” us into shape: he looks for (and rewards) our earnest efforts. And if we are frustrated about having a similar laundry list of sins in every confession, we need to ask how seriously we’ve looked at what leads to those sins and evaluate whether we have really made the changes necessary to avoid them.

In any case, I think it comes down to the consideration of virtue and vice. Virtue is a firm and habitual disposition to do the right thing. If we have a virtue, we have a moral strength. The virtuous person does what is right and good with relative ease. And moral strength, like physical strength, has to be built up – it does not come automatically or passively. But how often do we think in terms of virtues, and their evil correspondents, vices, nowadays? We have largely strayed from this traditional, structured, tried-and-true moral framework.

Let’s consider a fairly common example: It could be that a person struggles with what we shall call “bad thoughts”. The vice connected with this is lust. The opposing virtue to lust is chastity. Now we cannot remove the vice and expect that the virtue will simply fill the resulting void; no, we have to pursue the virtue in a positive manner. So if a person struggles with bad thoughts, he needs not only to try to cut out the sources of temptation, but also to train his mind and heart in a positive way to be pure.

Here we should remember what St. Paul taught the Philippians: “whatever is true,... honorable,... just,... pure,... lovely,... gracious, if there is any excellence,... anything worthy of praise, think about these things”. The person tempted by lust desires beauty and even love, albeit in disordered ways. Merely cutting out temptation may leave him more in a test of endurance than in a situation of growth toward true chastity. It is necessary to put something good and wholesome in the place of what was bad.

Thus we could do with all the areas where we fail to have “the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus” – where we are more son number one or two, rather than number three, like Christ. We need to look for the vices that underlie our disobedience, then pursue their

corresponding virtues. We need to take out what is bad and put the opposing good in its place. And we need to stick with it, for this strength comes only with repeated effort. With such a structured, classic approach, we will make true progress in conversion. It worked for so many saints; it will for us, too!