

## MORE THAN LIP SERVICE

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*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12b-13)*

Hollywood film critics are not of one mind as to what may be the few greatest movie scenes of all time. If you go to the internet in search of such a list, you will find mention of everything from the car chase in *The French Connection*, to the shower scene in *Psycho*, to the moment of revelation between Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr in *An Affair to Remember*. As for me, I don't have any authority to weigh in on such matters. But let me tell you about one scene I have always remembered, and thought about again and again.

The scene is a baptism in Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film *The Godfather*. It is the mid-1950's, and an Italian-American Mafioso family gathers in a large Roman Catholic church, presumably on Long Island. The baby to be baptized is the newest member of the family, and Michael Corleone, portrayed by a young Al Pacino, is to be the child's godfather. Michael is also the child's uncle, and the son of the crime family patriarch. At first he'd wanted nothing to do with the family business. He'd been a soldier in World War Two, and then graduated from college. But life and family dragged him into the underworld, and now he was in up to his neck. In fact, a few days prior to the baptism, Michael had been tipped off that rival crime bosses had a plan in place to kill him. So on the day of the baptism, what Michael does is unleash his own assassins on his enemies.

In the movie, we see the church ceremony unfold with all its pre-Vatican II splendor. As the Cardinal prepares the baby for baptism, the camera cuts away to Michael's hired assassins preparing their weapons and disguises. In the church Michael pledges belief in God, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. At the same time, one of Michael's hired guns murders three men stepping off an elevator. In the church Michael renounces Satan and all his works. At the courthouse steps Michael's assassins gun down still more rivals in the plain light of day. Back and forth it goes, from the church to the street, with a brilliant montage between baptism and brutality. The whole scene is striking in its portrayal of Michael Corleone, a man whose words and deeds are simply a universe apart.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew has reminded me of the scene from *The Godfather*. In one of the lesser known parables of the Gospels, we've heard Jesus tell the story of two sons whose words and deeds are completely disconnected. The setting is probably a small family farm. One morning the farmer rousts his two sons saying, "Rise and shine, boys. It's time to go work in the vineyard." As you know, the first son replied curtly and gruffly: "I will not." Most commentators are quick to point out what such a response from a son to a father would convey in the days of Jesus. It was more than your typical teenage argument. It would imply a total rejection of the father's authority and a lack of love. "Kiss off!" would be a two-word translation that might approximate the true spirit of the remark (pulpit etiquette prevents me from saying the two words that would be the most accurate translation). The first son was rude and impolite, at best. His "no" brought shame to his father and damage to the relationship. Yet he changed his mind and went out to work in the fields. He amended his ways and eventually did his duty. We might imagine that he did his duty with very little delight. But still he did it.

The second son replied quite differently from the first. When his father instructed him to “go and work in the field today,” the second son said, “I go, sir.” If the first son’s reply was harsh and cold and rude, the second son’s words conveyed all the respect and love that a father would want from a son. The second son was agreeable, pleasant, and apparently eager to do his father’s will. He delighted at the thought of doing his duty. Yet, as you know, he never made it out to the field that day, despite his good intentions. So the second son, too, brought shame to his father and damage to the relationship. He was all delight, but no duty.

*Which of the two did the will of his father,* asked Jesus? “The first,” answered the original hearers of the parable. But it seems to me that Jesus never really did say whether his listeners were right or wrong. You see, I think it’s a trick question. I think it’s a question that asks us to choose between the lesser of two evils. “Neither,” would have been the better answer. I can easily imagine how at the end of the day the father wasn’t pleased with either son. Both sons – one with loveless deeds, the other with empty words – fall short of their father’s good pleasure. Both sons are hypocrites, whose words and deeds are far apart. Both sons, at times, are us. I’m going to take it for granted that you’re not a mobster like Michael Corleone, but still, you know what it’s like when life disconnects your deeds from your words, when what you need to do to get through the day contradicts the ideals you claim to hold, when the life you practice just doesn’t square with the faith you profess. Perhaps, like the first son, your initial reaction even to good proposals is always a no. You become known as a negative force, a curmudgeon, always quick with the reasons why something can’t be done. Even though in the end you come round to doing the right thing, your persistent nay-saying strains every relationship you have.

More often, though, I think our tendency is to be like the second son. We say yes to this, and yes to that without understanding what it might take for our words to be more than lip service. We profess belief in God without really knowing how to give form to our faith. We intend to do God’s will without counting what it will cost to give substance to our spirit. The second son also strains every relationship he has in a different way. People like him, but learn not to count on him. So the challenge of the parable is not to judge which is the better of the two bad sons. The challenge of the parable is to cultivate within us what is the best of both brothers: the first son’s dutiful deeds and the second son’s delightful words. The challenge is to see the rift between our will and our work and bring them back in line with each other. And not just in line with each other, but in line with the mind of God. Paul the Apostle put it this way: *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

But how? What are we supposed to do? Back in the 1950’s my mother taught elementary school in East Orange, New Jersey. She remembers a little boy named Jimmy who was about four years old when she first met him. Jimmy came from a broken home. During the day his mother would simply drop him off at the school playground while she presumably went to work. He was too young to go to school, but he would occasionally sneak inside the building and try to join in with a class. Many a time he would burst into my mother’s classroom in the middle of a lesson and shout, “*What we ‘posed to do?*” Little Jimmy didn’t know it, but his was a question of the first order: what are we supposed to do in this life? What are we, the people of Grace Church, who say the say the Creed, and pray the prayers, and sing the hymns, and renounce Satan and all his works supposed to be doing?

Today I want to encourage you to think in perhaps a new way about the most obvious thing we’re doing. Obviously, we have been involved in the restoration of this building for a long time now. In the seven years that I’ve been Rector of Grace Church, we’ve renovated the basement and first floor of the Federal Houses on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, then it was the chantry chapel and Honor Room, then the south transept, then the chancel aisles and basement of the church. Now it’s the choir and sanctuary. Next comes the new organ. Will it ever stop? Our cry goes up,

“How long?” Someone peering in on our life from the outside might conclude that for us, it’s all about the edifice. “This congregation has an edifice complex,” is what they might say. “God says to go work in the vineyard today, and all they do is restore the building. Hypocrites. Their words and deeds are far apart,” is what they might conclude. What about the little Jimmys right in lower Manhattan who are falling through the cracks? What about the homeless who wander the streets? What about the youth of today who need moral guidance and Christian formation? Aren’t we supposed to be taking care of all these?

We are. Let me draw a bright, unbroken line between restoring the facilities, and obeying the Christian mandate to go work in the vineyard. The Federal Houses on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue that we renovated include not only Sunday School rooms where children can learn about Jesus, but also offices for the GO Project. As of this summer we’ve set aside even more space for the GO Project on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Parish House. What is the GO Project? The GO Project is a daughter ministry of Grace Church that tutors and mentors three-hundred at-risk public school students and their families. If only something like the GO Project had been available for my mother’s little friend Jimmy, he might have had a better start in life. The GO Project wasn’t there for him, but thank God it’s here for hundreds of similar children today. The truth is, without these facilities, the GO Project would be hard pressed to operate at all. By restoring the facilities we serve God’s people.

What about the homeless? The problems besetting our nation and economy are manifold and complex. They are pushing more and more people below the poverty line, out of work, and sometimes out onto the streets. What can be done? One small thing that we do is open the building every day so that those who need to escape the scorching summer heat or freezing winter cold can do so. Even as the restoration proceeds, our number-one priority is to keep the church open. It’s not much, but it’s something. And sometimes it allows us to connect a homeless person with an agency of mercy that will help him or her reach for a better life. The poet Walt Whitman once referred to Grace Church as a lighthouse looming up over the unquiet sea, shining down on the living waves of the busiest three miles of Broadway. For some people, we can shine the light towards a better way. Keep the doors locked up during the day, and it’s like putting out the light at the top of a lighthouse.

What about the next generation – today’s young people whom we hope will grow up not only to love God, but to love doing God’s will? When I look back on my own faith formation, one of key ingredients for me was being a choirboy. Something about singing the music of Handel, Gibbons, Byrd, Bach and others planted a seed of faith in me as nothing else could. I wasn’t aware of the benefits at the time; I see them now in retrospect. I remember a talented organist and choirmaster, and a pipe organ that shook the building being at the heart of it. Did you know that we have seventy-four young choristers in the Boys Choir and the Girls Choir? Talk about youth ministry! The new Grace Church organ is going to be at the very center of a thriving youth ministry.

My purpose today is not to pat ourselves on the back. Far from it. In fact, I reach the end of too many days fearing that we have left undone the things we ought to have done, and that our deeds have not risen to the high level of our prayers and hymns and anthems. However, what I do you hope you will consider is that the work we are doing on the building is a faithful response to God, who calls us to work in his vineyard today. We are giving form to our faith. We are putting substance in our spirit. We are putting our money where our mouth is. It is more than lip service.

Indeed, what we are doing is working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, knowing it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and work for his good pleasure.