“Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you do!” I wish I could have seen the looks on their faces when Jesus said that to the chief priests and elders of the temple.

We’re used to seeing Jesus always showing mercy, compassion and forgiveness to sinners he encounters. He’s encouraging, consoling. That’s how He changes people’s hearts to turn to God, to conversion.

But the chief priests and elders wouldn’t listen to Jesus. They were so attached to their power and status and privileges that whenever John the Baptist and Jesus revealed God’s will in their preaching, they consistently rejected them. So Jesus has only harsh words for these self-righteous, hard-hearted guys.

That’s the distinction Jesus is drawing in his parable of the father and two sons we just heard. The son who says yes dad, I’ll do what you want, but then does nothing, represents the religious people Jesus criticized. They knew all the rules, but forgot the spirit behind them. They forgot God’s love, and love of neighbor. They forgot the prophets’ call to conversion. They forgot God’s mercy and compassion that offers salvation to anyone who does his will. They don’t change. They do nothing to advance God’s will as Jesus presents it. They’ve made up their minds about who’s going to Heaven. And it’s not Jesus or his followers.

The other son, who tells his dad, “No, I’m not going into the field to work,” but then later does – that son represents those tax collectors and prostitutes Jesus spoke about. They worked in sinful occupations and lead sinful lives. When they heard John the Baptist and Jesus’s Good News, they first said No to it. But later they repented and changed their lives. They do God’s will.

What Jesus is saying to us today, is that it’s time for us to walk the talk. Don’t just pay lip service to doing God’s will. We can’t follow the sinful lifestyles that are portrayed in movies and TV shows that our society allows. To do God’s will means making some changes to the way we live, so we walk the right path with Jesus – even the way of the cross.

It isn’t always easy to do God’s will. St. Augustine describes his struggle for conversion in his autobiography. He’d reached the point in his life where he knows the Christian way is the right way. But he’s straddling two worlds: he’s planted one foot on doing God’s will, and the other on his old ways that he still enjoys. And in his struggle he cries out: “Save me Lord – but not yet.” … Not yet.

I have those kind of days. There are parts of my life that still need conversion. Have you felt that struggle, that divide, when we’re caught between doing God’s will and doing what we’d rather do? Each one of us has a little of both sons in us.

The good news is that God doesn’t change his mind about wanting us to be saved and enjoy eternal life. Whether we say Yes or No to God’s will, God keeps calling us. He’s patient and ready to forgive us anytime we’re ready to repent, whenever we’re ready for conversion, to walk away from our favorite sins.

One key to doing God’s will is to focus more on others instead of ourselves, to pay more attention to the needs of those who cross our paths. Then we begin living on earth like we will in Heaven.

Jesus doesn’t want disciples who are hypocrites, like the son who said yes to his dad but did nothing, like the religious people who only go through the motions. Let our words and our lives say Yes to God.

Fr. John Ozella
Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A – October 1, 2017