

When the English author G K Chesterton was asked, “What is wrong with the world?” Chesterton said, “I am.” I suspect most of us would answer quite differently: what’s wrong with the world? The terrorists, the government, the liberals, right wing fanatics. What’s wrong with the world? Other people.

But Chesterton said, “I am.” Chesterton was not taking personal responsibility for all the world’s problems. He simply acknowledged our inherent human inclination to wrong, and our personal responsibility for the wrong that we do. Original sin and conscience.

Chesterton could be likened to the first son in today’s gospel parable. In his early living said no, but had a change of heart. He sinned, but repented. And Christ likened the first son to the tax collectors and prostitutes, in contrast to the chief priests and the elders as the second son.

“The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.” These words were especially harsh to the Jewish people of the gospel times. The Israelites were a nation occupied by a foreign government.

The dishonesty of tax collectors compounded already unjust taxes, and the pagan prostitutes corrupted the Hebrew youth. The tax collectors undermined their economy. The prostitutes poisoned their family life.

Some have seen a modern equivalent in drug pushers and pornographers. You would be very insulted if you were told that the drug pushers and pornographers were closer to God than you.

That comparison, of course, must include the element of repentance. The presumption is that they turned their lives around after encountering Christ.

Perhaps a more realistic comparison would be alcoholics, drug addicts, porn addicts who are honest to admit their addictions and are striving for a better life.

*Those who admit of no fault in their lives cannot move closer to God.

*But whoever admits of a wrong, has a sense of needing God and more easily approaches God.

“The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.” Those struggling with their sinfulness know that salvation is only from God.

Recovering alcoholics, drug addicts, porn addicts can have a noble quality if they honestly face their addictions, admit their sickness, and realize the need for God.

*The self-righteous, by contrast, have no need of God. They are their own salvation.

*Those struggling with sin are closer to God than those who blind to their sins.

+C. S. Lewis put it this way, "Prostitutes are in NO danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God. The proud, the avaricious, the self-righteous, are IN that danger."

This parable, however, is not black and white with neat categories of one person being a “no then yes” and the other being the “yes then no” person. Or -Loser/winner – faithful/unfaithful. Most of us go through life experiencing exactly what these two sons experienced.

It is a universal condition, (the psychologist William James) once described as “the divided self” condition. For example, most of us find it difficult to “always” be good – to “always” do the right thing. We can, throughout life, find ourselves falling into both categories.

*How many of us has agreed to do something way in the future and when the time arrives, in comes the thought, “What was I thinking...Maybe I can find a way out of doing this.”

*Or maybe like a parent who promises to be there for their kid’s event, but work pulls them away.

+Oh, but we had good intentions! There was once a public service announcement that was themed: "Don't Almost Give". One ad shows a man with crutches struggling to go up a flight of concrete stairs. The narrator says, "This is a man who almost learned to walk at a rehab center that almost got built by people who almost gave money."

After a brief pause, the announcer continues: "Almost gave. How good is almost giving? About as good as almost walking." Each ad ends with a simple, direct message: "Don't almost give. Give."

*In my vocation, I am often approached by people with such good intentions, believing that I need to do this or that, but when the time comes, they are nowhere in sight to help with this! A yes, then an “almost.”

So, we shouldn’t be surprised that our “doing good” is not always constant – not always steady – and is not unwavering. We often feel like we are in a kind of spiritual “tug-of-war” with ourselves; being pulled this way and that way by contrary attractions. Life, therefore, becomes a struggle for us.

The typical spiritual journey of a soul toward God is usually not a direct, constant, straight line, always propelling us toward God – like a rocket.

No! It is rather like a series of zig-zags; constantly being on and off course; following one tendency for a while, but then changing course when another tendency takes over. The issue is, where do we end up in the zig-zag?

The best hope in following the proper course is that we need to be honest about ourselves. How did Socrates put it? “An unexamined life is not worth living.” We can all admit in the scheme of things, that we are sinners. That is easy. But look within. What are we?

Only when I can pronounce my own name with such terms – I am envious, I am proud, I am unforgiving – can I move closer to God.

It would be wrong to read today’s gospel as soft on sin and evil.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes were entering the kingdom of God before the Scribes and the Pharisees NOT because they were dishonest or promiscuous but because they were humble and repentant.

They admitted their wrong and reformed their lives. They were closer to God not for sinning, but for repenting. Everyone is a sinner. Not everyone is repentant. St. Francis of Assisi said that saints were sinners who kept on trying.

What is wrong with the world? The chief priest and elders answered, “You people - Other people.”

The tax collectors and prostitutes said, “I am” And Jesus said, “Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven before you.”