

A trustworthy word? (Matthew 21:23-32)

What an odd little parable. Neither son tells the truth.

by [JoAnn A. Post](#)

September 25, 2026

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

He looked me in the eye, extended his hand, and asked, "Would I lie to you?"

Because he was married to one of my dearest friends and I really wanted to believe him, I nodded. "I know you would never lie to me. Or my friend." I immediately felt ashamed for having doubted him and his word.

It was only later, after proof of the husband's unfaithfulness became public and irrefutable, that I remembered that conversation. Why had he introduced the question of lying into a conversation about my fears that he was hurting my friend? Why up the ante and flip the accusation? I should have known at that moment that he was manipulating me just as he was conning his spouse.

We meet a similar character in this week's parable.

The older son is a classic manipulator, one whose actions do not correspond with his words. *Will you go out in the field and help with the harvest?* the father asks.

Sure, Dad. Right away, Dad. The son's eagerness should be suspect. But the father wants to believe him.

When the younger son is asked to work in the field, he refuses. *Jeez, Dad. Do I have to?* Is the father surprised at the son's refusal? Is this son often obstinate, a mule of a child? For reasons not shared with us, the younger son eventually puts on his work clothes and gloves and wades into the grapes.

What an odd little parable. Neither son has told the truth. Is the father fooled? Has this happened before? Does he know both his sons to be liars, manipulators? Is it better to say yes and do no or to say no and do yes? If a parent cannot trust a child's word, if a spouse cannot trust a partner's word, how are we to live together?

Though this parable is prompted by a cagey question from religious leaders about the source of Jesus' authority, Jesus knows their interest is feigned. They want only to trap him, make a fool of him. Jesus recognizes their disingenuousness and the low stakes of their accusation. But Jesus also knows that, only five chapters on, he will be faced with life-threatening duplicity and manipulation. Not from nameless chief priests and elders, as in this text, but from his own disciples.

"Would I Ever Lie to You?" Judas will sit beside Jesus at dinner as though betrayal has never crossed his mind. Peter, when confronted with his eventual denial, protests too much: *Me? Deny you? Never!*

Jesus' parable holds a mirror before both casual confronters and would-be disciples. Which of these two children are you? Is your word to be trusted? And, to the point, when the danger is real, the challenge enormous, will you tell the truth?