

# The Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

## Afterwards He Went

Roman Missal, Third Edition · Lectionary for Mass, no. 136 · 27 September 2026

A homily

A man had two sons, and a vineyard with work waiting in it. In the words of the old Douay Bible, he came to the first and said, “Son, go work to day in my vineyard.” And the son said to his face, “I will not.” He came to the second and said the same, and the second gave the answer every father hopes to hear: “I go, Sir.”

But the story does not end with the words. “Afterwards, being moved with repentance”, the first son “went”. And the second, the one with the beautiful answer, “went not”.

“Which of the two did the father’s will?” A child could answer that. The first to answer it were the chief priests and the elders of the people, in the temple. They had asked Jesus by what authority he acted, and he had asked them in return whether John’s baptism was from heaven or from men. They would not say. So he told them about the two sons and let them be the judges, and they said, “The first.” They had judged themselves. “Amen I say to you”, Jesus answers, “that the publicans and the harlots shall go into the kingdom of God before you.” The publicans and the harlots believed John; “but you, seeing it, did not even afterwards repent, that you might believe him.”

Listen to that little word, *afterwards*. The story used it of the first son: afterwards he repented, and went. Now Jesus turns it round on his hearers: not even afterwards.

Saint John Chrysostom, preaching on this Gospel, states the charge exactly: “For an evil thing it is not at the first to choose the good, but it is a heavier charge not even to be brought round.” These men are not condemned for once having doubted John, but because they watched the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the very people they had written off, believe John and change their lives, and even then would not move.

Yet even this hard saying has a door in it. Chrysostom explains: “the word, ‘go before you,’ is

not as though these were following, but as having a hope, if they were willing.” The chief priests may still follow.

The first reading gives the same answer through the prophet Ezekiel. He lived among the captives, far from home, and he answered a proverb going round the land of Israel: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the teeth of the children are set on edge.” We are paying for our parents’ sins, they meant, and nothing we do can change it. When the Lord told them otherwise, they complained: “The way of the Lord is not right.”

The Lord answers with two cases. The just man who turns away from his justice and commits iniquity shall die in it. The wicked man who turns away from his wickedness, and does judgment and justice, “shall save his soul alive”. Saint Jerome puts the whole chapter in one sentence: each will be judged in that in which he is found. Not by his old record. And for the two sons, not by the first word. By where he is standing when the Lord finds him. And the Lord says why: “Is it my will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways, and live?”

The Lord’s way cuts in both directions, and Chrysostom, on the parable, gives two warnings in one breath: “Let no man then of them that live in vice despair; let no man who lives in virtue slumber.”

So which son are we?

Most of us here have given the second son’s answer: at the font, in our promises and our vows, and every time we answer Amen. We are the people of “I go, Sir.” Saint Thomas Aquinas turned the second son on the Church’s own, on clerics and religious who profess and do not do: a double sin, he says, of disobedience and of a broken vow. It is not a long step from the cloister to the pew.

But there is a first son in every one of us as well: the part of us that has said, in one way or another, I

will not. For him this Gospel is good news, because afterwards is still possible. Chrysostom tells us how God receives the one who turns: “God is not as man, for He reproaches us not with the past, neither doth He say, Why wast thou absent so long a time? when we repent.” That is what today’s psalm asks: “The sins of my youth and my ignorances do not remember.” It is the prayer of someone who has wandered and cannot find the way back alone, unless the Lord comes out to meet him.

There is one danger in all this mercy, and Augustine names it. A man says to himself: God has promised to forgive me whenever I turn, so I can turn later. Augustine grants him the promise, and asks, “who hath promised thee a to-morrow?” In the same sermon he says: “‘To-morrow, To-morrow;’ is the raven’s croak. Moan plaintively as the dove, and beat thy breast.” Aquinas noticed the small word in the father’s command, go work *to day*: today, he says, as if to say, through the whole time of your life. The call stands over the whole of a life, and no one has told you how long your life will be.

But that is only half of this Mass. Look once more at the two sons. Neither of them gave the father both the word and the deed. Is there a son who says yes, and goes?

Saint Paul answers in the second reading. He asks the Philippians for humility, and gives the reason: “let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Then he goes straight on to say what that mind did. Christ, “being in the form of God”, “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant”. “He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.” “He became obedient as a Son to His Father”, says Chrysostom, and in that very act he was greatly honouring the Father.

Here is the Son whose yes was done, all the way to the cross.

He is not only an example to copy. He is God, who came down to where we were. Augustine says that “proud man would have perished eternally, had he not been found by the lowly God”. The one who said yes came out to find those who had said no.

That is why the prayer at the start of this Mass could say something so bold: that God shows his almighty power above all in sparing and in mercy.

Blessed Ildefonso Schuster, Archbishop of Milan, wrote that to bring back a sinner “requires, so to speak, a condescension and powerful energy on the part of God, such as the creation of the world itself never once called for”. Condescension here means a stooping down: God going down into the abyss to draw the sinner out.

That is the Son we meet at this altar. When we bring our gifts and ask God to accept them, we bring the turned heart of the first son, and the Son who obeyed unto death takes it into his own offering.

One of the two verses the Missal gives for Communion today is John’s: “he hath laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” Augustine, reading a proverb about sitting at a ruler’s table, asks: “what is the table of the ruler, but that from which we take the body and blood of Him who laid down His life for us? And what is it to sit thereat, but to approach in humility?”

That sounds far beyond us. “Do not too soon despair of thyself”, Augustine told his people. It begins close at hand: if you are not yet ready to die for your brother, you can begin now by giving what you have to a brother in need. To one who claims the Christian name without its work he says, “Thou hast the name, and hast not the deeds.” Set that beside today’s Gospel, and you have the second son.

And after Communion we will ask that this mystery from heaven repair us, mind and body, and make us fellow heirs of his glory. A turning that has begun still needs mending, and he mends it here.

So carry one thing out of this church today. Somewhere in your life there is an “I go, Sir” that you said and have not kept: a promise to God, a promise to someone you love, a confession you keep meaning to make, a brother in need you keep meaning to help. Do not answer it with the raven’s tomorrow. Go today. The Father will not ask why you were absent so long. You will find him already coming out to meet you, in the Son who said yes for you, all the way to the cross.

The call is spoken to every one of us, daughter and son alike, for the whole of our lives: “Son, go work to day in my vineyard.”

## Note on Sources and Delivery

**Audience and occasion.** An adult parish assembly, at the Mass of the Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A: *Dominica XXVI “per annum”* of the *Roman Missal*, Third Edition, for the dioceses of the United States, with no. 136 of the *Lectionary for Mass*, for the occurrence of 27 September 2026. The words hold under either form of the second reading. Philippians 2:3 and 5 stand in both forms; 2:6–8 are quoted as what Paul goes on to write after 2:5, and not as words the assembly has heard. Of the two Communion antiphons, the second is named as one of the pair the Missal gives.

**Length and pace.** The spoken body runs to 1,553 words, counted as whitespace-separated words once comments and markup are removed: about twelve minutes at an unhurried 130 words a minute, a little under twelve and a half at 125, and a little under thirteen at 120. That is arithmetic on the word count; no speaker has delivered these words and no delivery has been timed. The prose was read through in full for sense, sentence length and ease of speech, silently and not aloud.

**Relation to the reviewed interpretations.** The argument preached is the first of the expansive study’s three interpretations, *Afterward He Repented: Each Is Judged Where He Is Found*. God judges each where he is found, so no sinner may despair of turning and no just man may rest on his past, and the turning is urgent because no one is promised tomorrow. Jerome on Ezekiel, Chrysostom and Aquinas on the parable, and Augustine on delay, on the psalm and on 1 John 3:16–17 carry it. It is joined to the third, *The Mind That Was in Christ Jesus: The Son Who Obeyed unto Death*, for the second reading, Chrysostom on Philippians 2:8, Augustine’s lowly God, Schuster on the Collect and Augustine’s table of the ruler. From the second, *The Publicans Go Before You*, come only the parable’s first hearers as Matthew names them, Chrysostom’s “go before you” as a hope held out to them, and Aquinas’s application of the second son to clerics and religious. The comparison in the study calls the first two complementary and the third different in kind, and all three put the deed before the word; the combination preached asserts nothing any of the three denies. The identification of the two sons with two peoples is not preached, and the application falls on the baptized.

Each Father is credited only with what he says of his own passage: Chrysostom’s charge, his hope and his two warnings of the parable, his obedient Son of Philippians 2:8; Jerome’s sentence of Ezekiel 18; Aquinas’s “today”, his professed just and his double sin of Matthew 21; Augustine’s tomorrow of the promise in Ezekiel, his lowly God of the washing of the feet, his table of the ruler of 1 John 3:16 read with a proverb, and his words to the beginner in charity and to the one who has the name without the deeds of 1 John 3:16–17; Schuster’s condescension of the Collect, glossed in his own sense as God’s descent into the abyss to draw the sinner out. The psalm heard as the prayer of one who has wandered and cannot find the way back unless the Lord comes out to meet him is Augustine’s reading of Psalm 24, spoken in the preacher’s words without his name. The following connections are the homily’s own, drawn from the wording of the texts, and no Father makes them: Jerome’s rule applied to the two sons’ first word; Chrysostom’s saying that God does not reproach the past set beside the psalm verse as what the psalm asks; the Amen of the baptized as the second son’s answer; the Son of Philippians 2 set beside the two sons as the one who says yes and goes; the gifts as the turned heart of the first son, taken into the Son’s offering; the Collect’s power in mercy read in the descent of the lowly God; Augustine’s sentence on the name without the deeds set beside the second son; the Prayer after Communion as the mending of a turning begun; and Aquinas’s “today” read with Augustine’s “tomorrow”.

Left to the studies: Jerome and Aquinas on whether the good works of one who falls away help him when he returns (the homily makes only the claim both hold, that no one may plead his past); Hilary’s reversal of the sons and the divided text of Matthew 21:31; Augustine and Aquinas on John 10:26, with the Alleluia verse; the Entrance Antiphon and the prayer of Azarias; the first Communion antiphon and Augustine’s joining of it to Ezekiel 18:22; and the early history of the Collect and the Prayer after Communion.

**Texts quoted, and their route.** Scripture is quoted in the Douay–Rheims version as revised by Bishop Challoner, a public-domain study translation, at Mt 21:28–32 (with 21:23–27 narrated), Ezek 18:2, 23 and 25–27 (with 1:1 and 3 for the captives), Ps 24:7 (Psalm 25 as the Lectionary numbers it), Phil 2:5–8 and 1 Jn 3:16. It is not the English proclaimed at Mass, which is that of the *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America* and is not reproduced. The Collect, the Prayer over the Offerings and the Prayer after Communion are described after the study’s descriptions of the Latin of the *Missale Romanum*; the descriptions are not translations and are not the prayers’ words. Chrysostom’s homilies on Matthew and on Philippians and Augustine’s sermon and tractates are quoted in the English of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, and Schuster in the English of 1927; each of those quotations was read in the tracked text at the locus below. Augustine’s exposition of the psalm and his beginning of charity in giving to a brother in need are followed in that English without quotation marks. Jerome and Aquinas are

reported without quotation marks, in English that renders the Latin the study prints; that Latin was read on page images at the research stage.

**Exact loci.** Chrysostom, “For an evil thing it is not at the first to choose the good . . .” and “the word, ‘go before you,’ . . .”: *Homilies on Matthew* 67.3; “Let no man then of them that live in vice despair . . .” and “God is not as man . . .”: 67.4; “He became obedient as a Son to His Father”, with the honour this act gives the Father: *Homilies on Philippians* 7. Jerome, *Unusquisque enim in quo invenietur, in eo iudicabitur*: *In Hiezechielem* VI, on Ezek 18:21–25, PL 25, col. 180. Aquinas, *Hodie, quasi per totum tempus vitae tuae*; the second son turned on clerics and religious, who profess justice; and *duplex peccatum; peccatum inobedientiae, et transgressio voti*: *Super Matthaëum* c. 21, pp. 275–276. Augustine, “who hath promised thee a to-morrow?” and the raven and the dove: *Sermo* 82.14; the psalm as the prayer of the wanderer who cannot return unless the Lord meets him: *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 24.5; “proud man would have perished eternally . . .”: *Tractates on John* 55.7; “what is the table of the ruler . . .”: 84.1; “Do not too soon despair of thyself”, charity begun in giving to a brother in need, and “Thou hast the name, and hast not the deeds”: *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* 5.12. Schuster, “requires, so to speak, a condescension and powerful energy . . .”, and God’s descent into the abyss to draw the sinner out: *The Sacramentary*, vol. 3, pp. 121–122.

## References

- *Missale Romanum*, editio typica tertia (Typis Vaticanis, 2002), *Dominica XXVI “per annum”*.
- *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America*, second typical edition, vol. I, no. 136, as witnessed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Liturgical Calendar* 2026, pp. 5 and 39, and its page of readings for 27 September 2026, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/092726.cfm>.
- The Holy Bible, Douay–Rheims version, revised by Bishop Richard Challoner (Project Gutenberg text): Ps 24:7; Ezek 1:1, 3; 18:2, 23, 25–27; Mt 21:23–32; Phil 2:5–8; 1 Jn 3:16.
- St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 67.3–4, trans. G. Prevost, rev. M. B. Riddle, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st ser., vol. 10; *Homilies on Philippians* 7, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st ser., vol. 13 (both in the electronic text of the Christian Classics Ethereal Library).
- St Jerome, *Commentarii in Hiezechielem* VI, on 18:21–25 (Migne, PL 25, Paris, 1845, col. 180).
- St Augustine, *Sermo* 82.14 (Sermon 32 on the New Testament Lessons), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st ser., vol. 6; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 24.5, 1st ser., vol. 8.
- St Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 55.7 and 84.1, and *In epistolam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus* 5.12, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st ser., vol. 7.
- St Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium Matthaëi* c. 21, in *Opera*, editio altera Veneta, vol. 3 (Venice: Bettinelli, 1745), pp. 275–276.
- Blessed Ildefonso Schuster, *The Sacramentary (Liber Sacramentorum)*, vol. 3 (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1927), pp. 121–122.

**Last revised (UTC):** 2026-10-01T22:32:35Z

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