When my grandmother was in her 90’s, she had fairly severe dementia and lived in a memory care facility. I would often go to visit her on Sunday’s and sometime around 3:00 in the afternoon a Pentecostal type preacher would show up and do a service for some of the residents in the common area. As my grandmother’s room was not large, we would often be sitting in an adjacent section of the common area. My grandmother was a dyed in the wool Presbyterian and even in her mental state knew that she wanted no part of this boisterous and animated man. One day she had heard enough of him and during a temporary moment of silence blurted out in a loud voice, “he’s a big talker.” For those of you who never knew my grandmother this was her version of the Texas assessment of someone being all hat and no cattle. Now I really don’t know anything about the Pentecostal preacher so I don’t know if grandma was right, but I do know that people exist who are, what my grandmother, called big talkers. In fact, we have one in the Gospel today, which we read just a minute ago, but in case you forgot here it is again. “A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go.” The second son was the big talker. He said he was going to do something and then did not do it. And big talk is a real problem for humanity and a really big problem for Christians. I mean how many stories are there about Christian leaders who talked extensively about virtuous living only to have been caught in seamy affairs or sleazy financial dealings. I can think of at least two that I have read about in just the past few weeks. It is a real temptation because as the cliché tells us talk is cheap. It is just as easy to talk about morally virtuous behavior as it is to talk about the weather, but it is much more difficult to actually live this way. Going back to the parable, what was harder, saying you would work or actually working? Similarly, what is harder, telling others to resist temptation and live a certain way or actually to resist temptation and live a certain way?

Back in my finance days we had an employee who hired a contractor to work on a short-term project. The quick version of the story is the contractor didn’t really do the actual work he had been hired to do. So, I told the employee that we were not going to pay the contractor. The professor told me that was unacceptable because we had told this contractor we would pay them. The conversation went back and forth with me insisting that we should not pay people for work they didn’t actually do and him insisting that a promise was a promise. Finally, in my frustration I said, “You are incredibly generous with other people’s money.” And people are because other people’s money just like big talk does not really cost us anything. But what God calls us to is not cheap but is rather costly. And we should not be surprised by this. After all Jesus invited us to pick up our cross and follow him. This was hardly an invitation to a day at Rancho Relaxo. But is it really bad? Is doing the will of God something that we need to plug our nose and do. Was the brother who did what his father asked a sucker? Much of what society tells us is that work is something we do so that we can retire and really enjoy ourselves. But is that really it? Does true joy come from the easy life, the life where we get to say my will be done?

To answer this let’s go to an unlikely place, Hercules. There is a Greek myth which is known as The Choice of Hercules or Hercules at the Crossroads and it tells the story of young Hercules on walk when he encounters a crossroads. On each of the two paths stands a goddess. The one on the left is Arete the goddess of virtue while the one on the right is Kakia the goddess of vice. Kakia is the first to speak and she tells Hercules that if he chooses her path, she can promise him a life of pleasure. But not just pleasure it will also be a life of ease, he will not have to work a day in his life; he can eat all that he wants and fill all of his carnal lusts. There will be no problems in his life. He will never encounter hardships and his breath will always be minty fresh. His life will look like the prospectus for a firm specializing in retirement – there will be lots of sailing, deep tans and open colored shirts. When Kakia finishes it is Arete’s turn to speak. She tells Hercules that she cannot offer a life of ease: Instead, if he chooses her path his life will assuredly not be easy. In fact, it will be extraordinarily challenging. It will feature hardships, adversity and pain. She concludes by saying that on her path there will be none of the ease or carnal pleasures that Kakia offers but she can promise one thing. At the end of all the adventures he will know true joy and true wisdom and he will be remembered for all generations. If any of you remember your Greek myths you will remember the path Hercules chose. It was the path with the Hydra, the Nemean Lion and the Erymanthian Boar. Hercules realized that all the pleasure and ease offered by Kakia would be fleeting; it would not be that which endured. He realized that in this life it is in the counterintuitive choice where we find true joy and happiness. The life of ease is ephemeral but the life of labor and duty is the place of lasting joy.

This seems to be something that our society needs to rediscover. In many ways we are a group of big talkers telling others to do this or not do that, but I don’t think all this big talk has given us much joy. I don’t have any data on this, but I am guessing if you asked any random person to think of a word that describes us, joy would not be the first, second or even thirty fourth word they came up with. And I think a fair amount of this can be attributed to not doing the work of the father. Think about it like this. When you were growing up or when you were raising your children you told them to do things like eat their vegetables. Now a much more popular message would have been to eat your funnel cake or cotton candy, but what would that have done to the health of the child? It would ultimately destroy their health. It is in the option that is less attractive to the children where they find health. Big talk will not get us the joy that is found only in God, but big action will. May we commit to walking in God’s ways and delighting in his will this day and forevermore.