

"The Prodigal God – Sermon 1"

Based largely on "The Prodigal God" By Timothy Keller

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Third Sunday of Easter

Text: Luke 15

DATE: April 18, 2010

IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

Before I begin this next series of sermons I want to give credit to Timothy Keller who wrote the book called 'The Prodigal God'.

Much of what you will be hearing over the next weeks will be directly from his book and so I won't take the time to site him every time I use his material. This series is meant to lay out the essentials of the Christian message – the Gospel. It can serve as introduction to the faith if you are unfamiliar with the teaching. But it can also serve as a primer for those who know the gospel quite well. Remember that one of the signs that you do not grasp the unique, radical nature of the Gospel is that you are certain that you do. Sometimes long-time church members find themselves so struck and turned around by a fresh apprehension of the Christian gospel that they feel that have been almost reconverted.

I believe that the following weeks will change the way many of us think of sin and salvation. I encourage you not to miss a single week. If you do, please catch up on line – you can listen to each week's sermon on our website.

This series is for both curious outsiders and established insiders of the Christian faith. Curious outsiders are those Jesus calls 'younger brothers'... Established insiders are those he calls 'elder brothers' in the famous parable of the prodigal son.

We are turning to this familiar parable in the 15th chapter of Luke in order to get to the heart of the Christian faith.

The parable's plot is very simple... There was a father who had two sons. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, received it and promptly left for a far country where he squandered it all on sensuous and frivolous pleasure. He returned home penitently and to his surprise, was received with open arms by his father. His reception angered and alienated the older brother greatly. The story closes with the father appealing to his first born son to join in the welcome and forgiveness of his younger brother.

Our first step is to unlock the basic meaning of the parable. Our second step is to see how the parable helps us understand the Bible as a whole. And finally how this teaching works itself out in the way we live in the world.

I will not be using the parable's most common name 'The parable of the Prodigal Son.' It is not right to single out only one of the son's as the soul focus of the story. Even Jesus doesn't call it the parable of the prodigal son. Rather, he begins the story by saying, 'A man had two sons.'" This parable is as much about the elder brother as the younger. And it is also just as much about the father as the sons. And what Jesus says about the elder brother is one of the most important messages given to us in the Bible.

The parable might be better called, 'The Parable of the 2 Lost Sons.' The word 'prodigal' means "recklessly spend-thrift."

It means "to spend until you have nothing left."

Believe it or not, this term is as appropriate for describing the father in the story as his younger son. The father's welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless because he refused to count his sins against him or demand repayment. This response from the father offended the elder son and most likely the local community.

In this story the father represents the Heavenly Father that Jesus knew so well.

In 1 Cor. 5:19, St. Paul writes, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them."

Jesus is revealing God to us as one who will pay a costly price. God is prodigal toward us his children. The price he pays for our redemption is nothing less than the blood of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ – who offers his life from the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. God's reckless grace is our greatest hope, a life-changing experience, and the subject of this series.

Let's hear the parable from Luke 15, (1-3) "Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: (11-32) "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer

worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

Most people reading this parable, or teaching on it, have concentrated on the flight and return of the younger brother – the 'prodigal' son. Sadly, that misses the real message of the story however – because there are two brothers. Each brother represents a different way to be alienated or separated from God. Each brother also represents a different way to seek acceptance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is critical to understand the historical setting that Luke provides for the setting of Jesus' teaching. In the first two verses Luke recounts that there were two groups of people that had come to listen to Jesus. First there were the tax collectors and sinners.

These men and women correspond to the younger brother in the parable. They don't observe the moral laws of the Bible. They don't observe the ceremonial laws of the Bible that devout Jews followed. They engaged in wild living Like the younger brother – they left home – leaving the traditional morality of their families and of respectable society.

The second group of people was the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law – who were represented by the elder brother in the parable. They held to the traditional morality of their upbringing. They studied and obeyed the Scripture. They worshipped faithfully and prayed constantly.

Two groups – the younger brothers and the elder brothers – but watch how each group responds differently to Jesus.

The younger brothers – the tax collectors and sinners - are described as continually gathering around Jesus to hear him. The tense of the Greek language conveys that this was an ongoing pattern in Jesus' ministry. In English we would say – "Wherever Jesus when this group was constantly attracted to him."

This phenomenon continually puzzled the moral and religious older brothers. They are described as muttering, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with

them." To sit down and eat with someone in the ancient near east was a token of acceptance. "How dare Jesus reach out to sinners like that," they muttered. These people never come to our services – why would they be drawn to Jesus' teaching. He couldn't be declaring the truth to them as we do – he must be just telling them what they want to hear.

So to whom is Jesus' teaching in this parable directed?

It is to the second group – the scribes and the Pharisees – the elder brothers. In fact - it is in response to their attitude that Jesus begins to tell the parable. The parable of the two sons takes an extended look at the soul of the elder brother. And climaxes with a powerful plea for him to change his heart.

Ironically, throughout the history when this text is taught in church or in religious education, the almost exclusive focus has been on how the father freely receives his penitent younger son.

But the target of this parable is not wayward sinners.

Rather, the target audience is the religious people who strive to do everything the Bible requires. Jesus is pleading not so much with immoral outsiders as he is desperately pleading with moral insiders. He wants to show them their blindness – narrowness – and self-righteousness. And he wants to show them how these things are destroying both their own souls and the lives of the people around them.

It is a mistake then to think that Jesus tells this story primarily to assure younger brothers of his unconditional love. That misses the entire point of the parable. The original listeners were not melted into tears by the story but rather they were thunder-struck, offended and infuriated.

Jesus' purpose is not to warm our hearts but to shatter our categories. Through this parable Jesus challenges what nearly everyone has thought about God, sin, and salvation. His story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother. But – it also condemns the elder brother's moralistic life in the strongest terms. That's right I said Jesus condemns the moral life of the elder brother. Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost. Both life paths are dead ends. And more importantly - that every thought that the human race has ever had about how to connect to God has been wrong.

We'll continue next week – I hope you come.