

"The Prodigal God – Sermon 3"

Based largely on "The Prodigal God" By Timothy Keller

Prepared by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Text: Luke 15

DATE: May 2nd, 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...

For the past two weeks we have been studying Jesus' parable of the two lost sons from Luke 15. Jesus' parable is a drama in two acts.

Act one is entitled 'The Lost Younger Brother'.

Act two is entitled 'The Lost Older Brother'.

Act one begins with a short but shocking request... The younger brother comes to the father and says, "Give me my share of the estate." The original listeners of Jesus' parable would have been amazed by such a request.

Not that there was anything amiss in the son's expectation of a share in the family's wealth. In those days when a father died the older son received a double portion of what the other children inherited. If a father had two heirs the older would have gotten 2/3's of the estate and the younger would have received 1/3. However this division of the estate only occurred when the father died. Here the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance NOW.

This was a sign of deep disrespect. To ask this while the father still lived was the same as to wish him dead. The younger son was essentially saying that he wanted the father's things – but not the father. His relationship with the father has been a means to the end of enjoying his wealth and now he is weary of that relationship. He wants out – NOW – 'GIVE ME WHAT IS MINE' – he says.

The father's response is even more startling than the request. This was an intensely patriarchal society in which lavish expressions of deference and respect for elders and particularly for one's parents

were of supreme importance. A traditional middle-eastern father would have been expected to respond to such a request by driving the son out of the family with nothing except physical blows. This father doesn't do anything like that - He simply divided his property between them. To understand the significance of this we should note that the Greek word translated 'property' here is the word 'bios' which means 'life.' A more concrete word to denote capital could have been used but wasn't. Why not? The wealth of his father would have primarily been in real-estate. To get 1/3 of his net worth he would have had to sell a great deal of his land holdings. In our mobile urbanized culture we don't understand the relationship of the people in former generations to their land. To lose part of your land was to lose part of yourself. To lose part of your land was to lose a major share of your standing in the community.

We have all heard stories of powerful and successful CEOs chucking their whole careers in order to care for a hurting needy child. While not an exact parallel, this is what the father in the parable does. This younger brother is asking his father to tare his life apart, and the father does so for the love of his son. Most of Jesus' listeners would have never seen a middle-eastern patriarch respond like this. The father patiently endures the tremendous loss of honour as well as the pain of rejected love. Ordinarily when our love is rejected we get angry, retaliate, and do what we can to diminish our affection for the rejecting person so we don't hurt so much. But this father retains his affection for his son and bears the agony.

Now we come to scene two of act one. The son goes off to a far country and squanders everything he has through an out of control life-style. When he is literally down in the mud with the pigs he comes to his senses and devises a plan. First he says to himself that he will return to his father and admit he was wrong and that he has forfeited the right to be his son. But secondly he intends to ask his father 'to make me like one of you hired men.'

This is a very specific request – servants worked on the estate and lived there. But hired men were various tradesmen and craftsmen who lived in local villages and earned a wage. Many commentators believe that the younger son's strategy went something like this... The younger son had disgraced his family and therefore the whole community. The Rabbi's taught that if you violated the community standard, an apology was not sufficient. You also had to make

restitution. The son intends to say, “Father, I know I don’t have a right to come back into the family but if you apprentice me to one of your hired men so I can learn a trade and earn a wage than at least I can begin to pay off my debt.” That was his plan – there in the pig-sty the younger son rehearses his speech – when he feels he is ready for the confrontation – he picks up and begins the journey home.

Finally we come to the dramatic third and final scene of act one. The younger son comes within sight of the house. His father sees him and runs – RUNS TO HIM. This is significant... as a general rule – the distinguished middle-eastern patriarchs did not run. Children might run. Women might run. Young men might run. But not the pater familias – the dignified pillar of the community – the owner of the estate. He would not pick up his robes and bare his legs like some boy.

But this father does. He runs to his son, and showing his emotions openly, falls upon him and kisses him. This almost surely would have taken the younger brother by surprise. Flummoxed by his father’s response - he tries to roll out his business plan for the restitution.

The father interrupts him, not only ignoring his rehearsed speech, but directly contradicting it. “Quick” he says to his servants, “Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” What the father is saying by these actions is very important. The best robe in the house would have been the father’s own robe, the unmistakable sign of restored standing in the family. The ring and the sandals are clear signs of son-ship.

The father is saying, “I’m not going to wait until you’ve paid off your debt. I’m not going to wait until you duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family. I’m simply going to take you back. I will cover your nakedness, poverty and rags with the robes of my office and honour.

Here God the father’s love for all humanity is pictured so perfectly. Through Jesus sacrificial death and resurrection God has given us a way back into his family. He has covered us with Jesus blood and righteousness – washing us of our sins and clothing us with Jesus the son.

The father then commands that the servants prepare a feast of celebration with the fattened calf as the main course. In that society most meals did not include meat which was an expensive delicacy.

Meat was often reserved for special occasions and parties. But no meat was more expensive than the fattened calf. To throw such a feast would have been something that happened on the rarest of occasions and likely the entire village was invited. Words spread quickly and soon there was a full fledged feast going on – with music and dancing to boot. All this to celebrate the restoration of the younger son to life, family, and community.

What a scene... The father has yet to deal with the much more complicated and poisonous spiritual condition of the elder brother in act two. But act one already challenges the mindset of older brothers with a startling message. God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every kind of sin and wrong doing. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. It doesn't matter if you've deliberately oppressed or even murdered people, or how much you've abused yourself.

The younger brother knew that in his father's house there was abundant food to spare. But he also discovered that there was grace to spare. There is no evil that the father's love cannot pardon and cover. There is no sin that is a match for his grace.

Act one then demonstrates the lavish prodigality of God's grace. Jesus shows the father pouncing on his son in love. Not only before he has a chance to clean up his life and evidence a change of heart but even before he can recite his repentance speech. Nothing – not even abject contrition – merits the favor of God. The father's love and acceptance are absolutely free. For all its beauty however – act one cannot stand alone. Act two comes next – and we will talk about that next week.