

"The Prodigal God – Sermon 5"

Based largely on "The Prodigal God" By Timothy Keller

Prepared by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Text: Luke 15

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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 four weeks we have been studying Jesus' parable of the two lost sons from Luke 15. 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.

What is the message of this parable? In short – Jesus is redefining everything we think we know about connecting to God. He is redefining sin. He is redefining what it means to be lost. And he is redefining what it means to be saved.

So let's look at Jesus' redefining of sin. Jesus uses the younger and elder brothers to portray the two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfillment. The elder brother in the parable illustrates the way of moral conformity. The younger brother in the parable illustrates the way of self discovery. In summary, "The person in the way of moral conformity says, "I'm not going to do what I want, but what tradition and the community wants me to do." The person choosing the way of self discovery says, "I'm the only one who can decide what is right or wrong for me. I'm going to live as I want to live and find my true self and happiness that way." The message of Jesus' parable is that both these approaches are wrong. His parable illustrates the radical alternative.

We have two sons – one bad – by conventional standards – and one good. Yet both are alienated from the father - he has to go out and invite each of them to come into the feast of his love. But the end of the parable comes to an unthinkable conclusion. Jesus deliberately leaves the elder brother in his alienated state. The bad son enters the father's feast but the good son refuses. The lover of prostitutes is saved but the man of moral rectitude is lost.

How could this be??? The answer is that the brother's hearts are the same. What did the younger son most want in life? He wanted the father's stuff but not the father. What did the older son most want? He too wanted the father's goods – rather than the father himself. However, while the younger brother went far away – the elder brother stayed close and never disobeyed. That was his way to get control. His unspoken demand is, "I have never disobeyed you, now you have to do things in my life they way I want them to be done."

The hearts of the two brothers were the same. Each rebelled. But one did so by being very bad while the other by being very good.

Do you realize then what Jesus is teaching? Neither son loved the father for himself. And what is the greatest commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your mind..." They both were using the father for the own self-centered ends, rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking all of his rules or by keeping them diligently. Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God.

In this parable Jesus gives us a much a deeper understanding of sin than any of us would have if he didn't supply it. Most people think of sin as failing to keep God's rules of conduct. But while not less than that, Jesus' definition of sin goes well beyond it. In her novel 'Wise Blood', Flanery O'Conner says of her character Hazel Moats that "there was a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin."

This is a profound insight... You can avoid Jesus as Saviour by keeping all the moral laws. If you do that, then you have rights. God owes you answered prayers and a good life. Not to mention a ticket to heaven when you die. You don't need a Saviour to die for your sins and who pardons you by free grace for you are you own saviour.

This attitude is clearly that of the elder brother in the parable. Why is he so angry with the father? He feels he has the right to tell the father how the robes, rings, and livestock of the family should be deployed. In the same way, religious people commonly live very moral lives, but their goal is to get leverage over God. Their goal is to control God, to put him in a position where they think HE OWES THEM.

Ironically, despite all their ethical fastidiousness and piety, they are actually rebelling against God's authority. If like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey Him and be a good person... Then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration... But he's not your Saviour... You are serving as your own saviour.

Underneath the brothers sharply different patterns of behaviour is the same motivation and aim. Both are using the father in different ways to get the things on which their hearts are really fixed. It was the wealth – not the love of the father – that they believed would make them happy and fulfilled. At

the end of the story the elder brother has the opportunity to truly delight the father by going into the feast.

But his resentful refusal shows that the father's happiness had never been his goal. When the father re-instates the younger son to the diminishment of the older son's share in the estate the elder brother's heart is laid bare. He does everything he can to hurt and resist his father.

Hear this brothers and sisters... If like the elder brother you seek to control God through your obedience then all your morality is just a way to use God to make him give you the things in life you really want.

A classic example of this is found in Peter Schaefer's play "Amadeus". In the play a young man by the name of Salieri makes a deal with God. Listen to Salieri... "I would offer up secretly the proudest prayer a boy could think of. 'Lord, make me a great composer. Let me celebrate your glory through music, and be celebrated myself. Make me famous throughout the world dear God. Make me immortal. After I die, let people speak my name forever with love for what I wrote. In return I vow I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility every hour of my life. And I will help my fellow man all I can. Amen and amen.'"

Salieri is serious and committed. He begins to make a life under this vow to God. He keeps his hands off women, works diligently at his music, teaches many musicians for free, and tirelessly helps the poor. His career goes well and he believes that God is keeping his end of the bargain.

Then Mozart appears... with musical gifts far above Salieri's. Mozart's genius was so great that it had obviously been bestowed upon him by God. Amadeus, Mozart's middle name, means "beloved by God." And yet – Mozart is a vulgar, self indulgent, younger brother type.

The talent and gifts God lavished so prodigally on Mozart causes a crisis of faith in the elder brother heart of Salieri. His words are remarkably close to this of the older son in Jesus' parable when he says... "It was incomprehensible! Here I was denying all my natural lusts in order to deserve God's gift. And there was Mozart indulging his lusts in all directions – even though engaged to be married – AND NO REBUKE BY GOD AT ALL!!!" Finally, Salieri says to God, "From now on we are enemies, you and I." And there after Salieri works to destroy Mozart.

Sadly, in Shaffer's play, God is silent. Unlike the father in Jesus' parable who reaches out to rescue the elder brother even as he begins to sink into the bitterness, hate, and despair that eventually swallows Salieri.

Salieri's diligent efforts to be chaste and charitable were ultimately revealed to be profoundly self-interested. God and the poor were just useful instruments. He told himself that he was sacrificing his time and money for the poor's sake, and for God's sake, but there was actually no sacrifice involved. He was doing it for his own sake, to get fame, fortune and self esteem.

"I liked myself", Salieri said, "Until he came... Mozart!" The minute he realized that his service to God and the poor wasn't gaining him the glory he craved so deeply, his heart became murderous. Soon, the moral and respectable Salieri shows himself capable of greater evil than the immoral, vulgar Mozart.

While the Mozart of 'Amadeus' is irreligious, it is Salieri, the devout, who ends up in a much greater state of alienation from God, just like in Jesus' parable. This mindset can be present in a more subtle form than it was in the life of Salieri. I knew a woman who had worked for many years in Christian ministry. When chronic illness overtook her in middle age it threw her into despair. Eventually she realized that deep in her heart she felt God owed her a better life after all she had done for him. That assumption made it extremely difficult for her to climb out of her pit – though climb she did. The key to her improvement however was to recognize the elder brother mindset within.

Elder brothers obey God to get things. They don't obey God to get God himself – in order to resemble him, love him, know him, and delight him. So religious and moral people can be avoiding Jesus as Saviour and Lord as much as the younger brothers who say that they don't believe in God and define right and wrong for themselves.

Here then is Jesus' radical definition of what is wrong with us. Nearly everyone defines sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus though, shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral miss-behaviours can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate immoral person. Why? Because sin is not just 'breaking the rules' – it is putting yourself in the place of God as Saviour, Lord, and Judge. Just as each son sought to displace the authority of the father in his own life.

The young Salieri would have objected strongly if someone had told him he was doing this. By being chaste and charitable was he not doing God's will rather than his own? Was he not honoring and submitting to God?

But by seeking to put God in his debt and get control over God by his good works, instead of relying on his sheer grace, he was acting as his own saviour. When he became murderously bitter toward Mozart, certain that God was being unjust, he was putting himself in the place of God as judge.

There are two ways to be your own Saviour and Lord. One is by breaking all the moral laws and setting your own course. And one is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very, good.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ reveals to us that everyone is loved by God and everyone needs God as Saviour. That is why God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to suffer and die on a cross. All mankind needed redemption. All of us, elder brothers and younger brothers, needed a Saviour. God, through his Son, became that Saviour.