

"The Prodigal God – Sermon 8"

Based largely on "The Prodigal God" By Timothy Keller

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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 two months 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.

Everybody knows that the Christian gospel calls us away from the licentiousness of younger brothers, but few realize that it also condemns moralistic elder brotherhood. Jesus is telling us that both younger brother and elder brother lostness are spiritual dead ends. Jesus clearly wants us to take a radically different approach – but what is it? We will find the answer when we realize that Jesus deliberately left someone out of this parable – and he did this so that we would look for him – and finding him find our own way home at last.

Luke 15 informs us in verse 1-3 that Jesus told not one, but three parables to the Pharisees who were complaining about his fraternization with sinners. The first parable is called the parable of the lost sheep. A man is tending a flock of 100 sheep but one goes astray. Instead of accepting this loss the shepherd goes out searching until he has found his lost sheep. Then he calls all around to rejoice with me for I have found my lost sheep.

The second parable is called the parable of the lost coin. In this story a woman has 10 silver coins in the house but loses one. She does not write it off as a loss but instead, lights a lamp, sweeps the whole house, and searches diligently until she finds it. And when she does, she calls her friends and neighbours and says, "Rejoice with me for I have found my lost coin."

The third parable is the story we have been studying, the parable of the two lost sons. The similarities among the three stories are obvious...

In each parable something is lost... sheep, coin, and son. In each the one who loses something gets it back. And each of the parables ends on a note of festive rejoicing and celebration when the lost one is returned.

There is though – one striking difference between the third parable and the first two. In the first two parables someone goes out and searches diligently for that which is lost. The searchers let nothing distract them or stand in their way. By the time we get to the third story and we hear about the plight of the lost son we are fully prepared to expect that someone will set out and search for him. No one does... it is startling... and Jesus meant it to be so.

By placing the three parables closer together he is inviting thoughtful listeners to ask, "Well who should have gone out and searched for the lost son." Edmond Clowney recounts the true story of a young man who was a US soldier missing in action during the Vietnam War. When the family could get no word of him through any official channel, the older son flew to Vietnam, and risking his life, searched the jungles and battlefields for his lost brother. It's said that despite the danger he was never hurt because those on both sides had heard of his dedication and respected his quest. Some of them called him simply, "The Brother."

This is what the elder brother in the parable should have done. This is what a true elder brother would have done. He would have said, "Father, my younger brother has been a fool and now his life is in ruins. But it will go look for him and bring him home. And if the inheritance is gone, as I expect, I'll bring him back into the family at my expense." Indeed it is only at the elder brother's expense that the younger brother can be brought back in. Because as Jesus had said, the father had divided the property between them before the younger son had left. Everything had been assigned. The younger brother had gotten his one third portion and it was completely gone.

Now when the father says to the older brother, "Everything I have is yours", he is telling the literal truth. Every penny that remained of the family estate belonged to the older brother. Every robe, every ring, every fattened calf, is his by right.

Over the years many readers have drawn the superficial conclusion that the restoration of the younger brother involved no atonement, no cost. They point out that the younger son wanted to make restitution but the father wouldn't let him. His acceptance back into the family was simply free. This they say, shows the forgiveness and love should always be unconditional.

That is an oversimplification... If someone breaks your lamp you could demand that she pay for it. The alternative is that you could forgive her and pay for it yourself, or go about bumping into furniture in the dark. Imagine another situation where someone has seriously damaged your reputation.

Again you have two options... you could make him pay for this by going to others, criticizing and ruining his good name as a way to restore your own. Or you could forgive him, taking on the more difficult task of setting the record straight without vilifying him. The forgiveness is free and unconditional to the perpetrator but it is costly to you.

Mercy and forgiveness must be free and unmerited to the wrongdoer. If the wrong doer has to do something to merit it then it isn't mercy. But forgiveness always comes at a cost to the one granting forgiveness.

While act one of the parable showed us how free the father's forgiveness was, act two gives us insight into its costliness. The younger brother's restoration was free to him but it came at enormous cost to the elder brother. The father could not just forgive the younger son – somebody had to pay. The father could not reinstate him accept at the expense of the elder brother, there was no other way.

But Jesus does not put a true elder brother in the story... one who is willing to pay any cost to seek and save that which was lost. It is heart breaking! The younger son gets a Pharisee for a brother instead. But we do not.

By putting a flawed elder brother in the story Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn for a true one. And we have him. Think of the kind of brother we need. We need one who does not just go to the next country to find us... but who will come all the way from heaven to earth. We need one who is willing to pay not just a finite amount of money but at the infinite cost of his own life to bring us into God's family.

For our debt is so much greater. Either as elder brothers or as younger brothers, we have rebelled against the Father. We deserve alienation, isolation and rejection.

The point of the parable is that forgiveness always involves a price. Someone has to pay. There was no way for the younger brother to return to the family unless the elder brother bore the cost himself. Our true elder brother paid our debt, on the cross, in our place. There, Jesus was stripped naked of his robe and dignity so that we could be clothed with a dignity and standing we don't deserve. On the cross Jesus was treated as an outcast so that we could be brought into God's family freely by grace. There, Jesus drank the cup of eternal justice so that we might have the cup of the father's joy. There was no other

way for the heavenly father to bring us in accept at the expense of our true elder brother.

How can the inner workings of the heart be changed from a dynamic of fear and anger to that of love joy and gratitude? Here is how. You need to be moved by the sight of what it cost to bring you home. The key difference between a Pharisee and a believer in Jesus is inner heart motivation. Pharisees are being good – but out of a fear filled need to control God. They don't really trust him or love him. To them God is an exacting boss, not a loving father. Christians have seen something that has transformed their hearts towards God so they can finally love and rest in the Father.

The acclaimed foreign film 'Three Seasons' is a series of vignettes about life in post war Vietnam. One of the stories is about Hy, a cyclo-driver (a bicycle rickshaw) and Lan a beautiful prostitute. Both have deep unfulfilled desires. Hy is in love with Lan but she is out of his price range. Lan lives in grinding poverty and longs to live in the beautiful world of the elegant hotels where she works, but in which she never spends the night. She hopes that the money she makes by prostitution will be her means of escape. But instead the work brutalizes and enslaves her. Then Hy enters a cyclo race and wins the top prize. With the money he brings Lan to the hotel and pays for the night, and pays her fee. Then to everyone's shock he tells her that he just wants to watch her fall asleep. Instead of using the power of his wealth to have sex with her, he spends it to purchase a place for her for one night in the normal world, to fulfill her desire to belong. Lan finds such grace deeply troubling at first thinking Hy has done this to control her. When it becomes apparent that he is using his power to serve rather than use her it begins to transform her, making it impossible for her to return to a life of prostitution.

Jesus Christ who had all the power in the world saw us enslaved by the very things we thought would free us. So he emptied himself of his glory and became a servant. He laid aside the affinities and immensities of his being and at the cost of his life paid the debt for our sins purchasing us the only place our hearts can rest in his Father's house.

Knowing he did this for us will transform us from the inside out as Hy's selfless love did for Lan. Why wouldn't you want to offer yourself to someone like this? God's selfless love destroys the mistrust in our hearts that makes us either younger brothers or elder brothers. John Newton, the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace" wrote another hymn that puts this perfectly... "Our pleasure and our duty though opposite before, since we have seen his beauty are joined – apart no more." In a few short words Newton outlines our delemma... The Choice before us seems to be either to turn from God and pursue the desires of our

hearts like the younger brother, or repress desire and do our moral duty, like the older brother. But the sacrificial costly love of Jesus on the cross changes that. When we see the beauty of what he has done for us it attracts our hearts to him. We realize that the love, the greatness, the consolation, and the honour we have been seeking in other things is here in Jesus.

The beauty also eliminates our fear. If the Lord of the universe loves us enough to experience this for us, what are we afraid of? To the degree we see his beauty we will be free of the fear and the neediness that creates either younger brothers or older brothers. We will never stop being younger brothers or elder brothers until we acknowledge our need, rest by faith, and gaze in wonder at the work of our true elder brother, Jesus Christ.