

“Prodigal Son” Luke 15:20-32 Jonathan Dorst 2/16/20

“20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

It is a real honor and privilege to be here and I am thankful to Steve Harden, my friend, for inviting me. I’ve known Steve, he was one of the first people I got to know when I moved to Tulsa, and he’s been a faithful friend. It was kind of cool I saw that last week he preached on infant baptism, which is kind of fun because he and I used to argue about well, discuss as friends, infant baptism and apparently he’s come around to my way of thinking, which is nice for me and fun. We actually listened to that sermon on the way over here, great sermon. But it is a privilege, thank you.

One of the places that my family lived, kind of on the journey to get here to Tulsa, was working at a church outside Washington D.C. and one of the summers that we lived there I was working on a sermon series, preaching Jesus’ parables in the book of Luke. And so, I decided I’d do something that I thought would help, and that was to put together what’s called a sermon support group, which can be a group of people who either helps you before you preach or after you preached to kind of help you think about the sermon. And so, I intentionally looked for people living near us who were unchurched, because I wanted to sort of, I’d grown up with these stories and I’d preached through them and I wanted to see them newly through different eyes. And so, there were three older single ladies who lived in the condo area we lived in, they’d

gotten to know us and loved playing with, at the time, our one baby and so I invited them to come and be a part of this support group and the format was just, we're going to take one of Jesus' parables a week and we're going to read it, and then I'd read it and I'd simply ask them what they thought. Right? I'd try not to color their interpretation, tell them what I thought, I just wanted to know what they thought.

And so, the first week we did the prodigal son parable and if you don't know this story, we just read a little over half of it. It's a story about a father who has two sons and the younger son asks for his inheritance and he goes off and he spends it, right? Women, wine and song until he's broke and having to get a menial job out in the field feeding pigs. And then he says, 'Ah I wish I could just go home and be a servant in my Father's house.' And so, he comes back, and the father welcomes him back, throws him a feast. But then his older brother gets angry, right? And so, I read this story to these ladies and then I said, "What do you think?" And I was expecting them all to sort of identify with the younger brother, right? Because I mean, who of us hasn't messed up? Who hasn't screwed up? Who of us is not grateful for a parent or a friend who's give us grace and welcomed us back, right? That's what I was expecting! That was not their answer. All three of the ladies identified with the older brother and they were not only perplexed, but angry at the father for letting this younger brother just come back and welcoming him back and throwing him a party, after he did all these terrible things to the family? Wow. That's really interesting. Well, let me ask you the same question. When you think about this story, which brother do you identify with: the younger brother, the rebellious black sheep of the family or the older brother, the dutiful but angry brother?

This story has often been called the story of the lost son, right? And this makes sense, because it's the third story in a trilogy about lost things that Jesus tells, which we'll talk about in just a second. But as we'll see, it's actually the story of two lost sons. Now, to really kind of get this story, we need to set the table, the context, a little bit. This is during Jesus' ministry and we find Him in Luke 15, He is spending time with a specific group of people. And it's really those people that probably your mother warned you about, right? That bad company corrupts good morals, people that were known to be immoral: prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners, right? And the religious leaders, the Pharisees, who see Jesus, are appalled that Jesus would keep this company. They say, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them!' In other words, 'This Jesus who's purporting to be a teacher of religion, of our religion, and He's hanging out with people who don't hold, don't keep our religion! He's got no credibility!' And so, Jesus, addressing the Pharisees, tells them three stories in order to change their hearts. The first story is about a shepherd who has 100 sheep and one of the sheep gets lost, and so he leaves the 99 to look, to go and search out the one. And the second story is about a woman who has ten silver coins, and

when she loses one, she literally turns her house upside down in order to find that one lost coin. And then the third story is about the father with two sons who holds out hope that his lost son will finally come home.

And now, there's a lot more going on culturally in this story than a lot of us with our modern American eyes see when we read it. The first thing has to do with the younger son's request. Remember I said, at the beginning of the story he asks his father for his share of the inheritance? Now, that probably doesn't sound too crazy to us, right? When Rachel and I were wanting to buy our first house, my in-laws gave us some money, they said, "This is a down payment on your inheritance," right? And they gave the same amount to her brother and helped us buy the house. It was probably somewhat normal. But in Jesus' day, an inheritance was typically not money, right? You didn't keep your money in the bank. In that society, in an agrarian society, your wealth and your inheritance was bound up in your land, and in your animals, your cattle and your sheep. That was the family's wealth and their ability and way of making money and the father, he would be the head of this extended family, and it was his job to take care of the family and run the affairs. And so, for this son to ask his father for his share of the inheritance is in some ways to say, 'You're not taking good enough care of me,' and in a way kind of saying, 'I wish you were dead so I could have what's coming to me,' which normally would only come after the father had passed on.

Also, the older son in Jewish families was expected to be the head of the extended family whenever the father died and so he would have gotten the larger share of the inheritance. So from the very beginning of the story we need to realize that the younger brother's demand for his inheritance was not only a massive insult to the father, but also would have had a huge impact on the older brother. Because in order for the father to give him his inheritance, he would have to sell off part of the land or cattle which would have weakened the family's economic status, would have weakened their social status in the community on all of those things. And when the older brother would have come into his inheritance, it would have been greatly lessened because of what the younger brother had done. And so, the older brother has a legitimate beef here, right? His younger brother is in some ways kind of destroying his family and the family's future, but he wants his fair share. You even hear that towards the end of the story, you hear the indignation in his voice, 'Dad you threw a party for this screw up? Where's my feast? I'm the one who stayed! I'm the one who has done the right thing! I'm the one who has been faithful and done my duty.'

Now, the older brother would not have been the only one who would have been angry about this betrayal. Kenneth Bailey is a Bible scholar, who in the 1960s went and lived in the ancient near east places where Jesus would have walked. And he lived among people who, in

many ways, live the same way today as they did 2,000 years ago in this agrarian tribal society away from modern technology. And so, he became a shepherd with them and wanted to learn how they lived and he would talk to them about what he was studying in the Bible. And one day he asked some of the people, he said, 'What would happen if a son asked his father for his share of the inheritance while he was still alive?' And they said, 'That would never happen. The shame that that son would have brought on his family, and the massive insult to the father, no son would ever think of doing that.' But Kenneth Bailey, he insisted, he said, 'But say it did happen, what would happen then? What would happen if the son tried to come home after losing all the money?' And they said this, they said, 'Probably what would have happened is all the men in the town, or the tribe, would have met this son as he was coming back to town and would have beaten him severely for the shame that he has brought on his family and on the community. And then, he would have probably been made to sit outside his father's house for a period of days, maybe even weeks, sort of atone for the shame. And if the father was exceedingly generous he would allow the son to come back into his household as a servant.' Which is what the younger son expects, right? He expects to come back as a servant. He knows he deserves to be disowned and he had no expectation of coming back as a son, he expected to live sort of in dishonor for the rest of his life.

And so, do you see how radical and jarring Jesus' image of this father looking for his son and running out to meet him, and not only happy to see him, but also wanting to get there before anybody else does, to meet him with grace and to welcome him back into the family, right? What does he do? He says, 'Bring the best robe! Put a ring on his finger!' which is a sign of having his sonship restored, being a part of the family again. It's a beautiful picture of grace, but it was anything but beautiful to the older brother. In fact, to the older brother it was disgusting.

In the academy award winning movie *Amadeus*, when the movie starts, we meet a composer called Antonio Salieri, and Salieri has reached a very good place in his life where he is a respected musician. He is the court composer to the king; he has a nice life and he has the people's respect, until Mozart shows up, right? And very quickly Salieri realizes that Mozart's talent dwarfs his talent and that he will never be able to be the kind of musician and composer that Mozart is. But instead of accepting that limitation, and maybe even learning from Mozart, what does he do? He gets angry and he gets angry with God, right? He says, 'How could you do this to me who has served you for so long? And this brat of a boy who's so much better than me,' and in this very memorable image he takes this crucifix he once wore and he throws it into the fire and he says, 'God, we are now enemies, you and me.' It's a very vivid picture of what our hearts often do. It's a very vivid picture of self-righteousness. The older brothers can't see beyond their own hurt, their own pride, to celebrate other's talent or success or celebrations.

But listen to how tender the father's words are to the older brother in verses 31 and 32 after the son has thrown this pity party. The father says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." He is pleading with his older son. 'This is huge for him to come back, don't you see?' But the older brother can't see it. Now, the real problem in this story is not the loss of inheritance, right? The real problem in this story is loss of relationship. And when you get down to it, neither brother acts like a son to this father. In different ways, right? The younger brother, he finds his joy and his significance in determining his own path, living the way he wants to live apart from the family, apart from the father. But the older son also finds his joy and his significance in doing his duty, apart from the father and the son and the family. Neither of them finds their joy or their significance in the father's love, and his relationship.

Jesus is telling us something about the core of Christianity, the core of our faith, that it is not about doing your duty. At its core is what Jesus calls the first and greatest commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The core of our faith is a relationship, and neither of these sons is showing love to their father. They are making their lives all about themselves. Now we see this throughout the Bible, right? In the Old Testament, Israel is very much the younger brother. They were called; they were chosen by God to follow Him, to worship Him, to live in His love, but what do they do? You can hardly go two pages in the Old Testament without them running off after other gods, running off and trying to be like the other nations. And I imagine a lot of us have had periods of our life where we've been like that, right? Running away from God, running away from responsibility, living only for ourselves and our own pleasure.

But I want to focus, kind of for the rest of this sermon, on the older brother and we see him in the Old Testament as well. Some very vivid examples, starting near the beginning in Genesis 4 we see Cain, who is an older brother literally, but also spiritually. He gets so angry when God does not accept his worship that he kills his younger brother, Abel. In the book of Job, we see Job's friends who, they think because they still have their family, they still have their land and wealth, that they are somehow better than Job and really, a lot of their advice is talking down to him. Jonah. Jonah was a classic older brother, right? Concerned only about his people, his future and his inheritance. He doesn't care about the people of Nineveh who are going to be destroyed, God tells him. He doesn't want them to get grace. He wants them to get judgement. Let me ask you this, do you identify with any of those older brothers?

Or let's try this, kind of a riff on a classic old routine, you might be an older brother if... If you believe that God owes you a good life because of all the good things you've done for Him.

You might be an older brother if you think that the success you've had in your life is mainly attributable to your hard work or if you think that all poor people are lazy and don't deserve help. You might be an older brother if you think that having better theology makes you a better person than those people with bad theology. You might be an older brother if you can't forgive people who have offended you or if you always have to be right when you are arguing with your spouse. You might be an older brother if your kids only get your approval if they get good grades and do well in sports or if you don't want the kids with the bad reputations coming to church because what will the neighbors think? Finally, you might be an older brother if you forget that once you were a younger brother apart from God's grace.

Well here's a question you may have wondered about if you've read this passage before, or when A.J. just read it. What happens at the end of this story? Because it ends pretty abruptly, doesn't it? The older son comes in when there's a party going on, and he's like, 'What's going on?' They say, 'Well, your brother's back and we're having a feast!' And then he gets mad at his father, right? 'This son of yours squanders your wealth, you're throwing a party, what about me?' And the father entreats him, 'Everything I have is yours.' And then it just ends, with the father's entreaty. What happens after that? Does the older brother go in to the party? Does he reconcile with his father or his younger brother? Well the answer is that the older brother kills the father. What? Where is that in the Bible? Is that Luke 25? No, there are only 24 chapters in Luke.

But remember who Jesus is talking to, the Pharisees, the religious leaders. They are the ultimate older brothers, taking the greatest pride in their ability to keep the law and looking down on everyone who's not as good at keeping the law as they are. And these same Pharisees, they never make peace with Jesus, the Son of God, and they are the ones who are behind His being accused, and arrested, and ultimately, put to death. The older brother kills the father. But here's Jesus trying to tell them, and us, through the power of story that they are in danger of loving their own righteousness, their own goodness, so much that they are going to write God out of their lives. Here is God, Himself, standing in front of them and they can't see past their own self-righteousness. He is trying to warn of a reality that they would never imagine, that they are in grave danger of living eternally apart from God.

I love what Sinclair Ferguson says, he says this: "Religious people are always profoundly disturbed when they discover that they are not and never have been true Christians. Does all of their religion count for nothing? Those hours in church, hours spent doing good things, hours involved in religious activity, do they not count for something in the presence of God? Do they not enable me to say, 'Look what I've done, don't I deserve heaven?' Sadly, thinking I deserve

heaven is a sure sign I have no understanding of the gospel.” See, it’s not really a question of ‘Am I self-righteous?’ The real question is ‘How self-righteous am I?’ See, the Christian life is, in some respects, learning more and more to uncover the self-righteousness that’s buried deep in my heart. And I would say that the more mature you become, the more you grow in the Christian life, the more you will see your own self-righteousness and the various and insipid ways it seeps into everything that you and I do. And here’s the thing, the most self-righteous person is the person who doesn’t think they are, and the most diluted person is one who thinks that they have no self-righteousness.

So, the million dollar question for those of us who dare entertain the notion that we might be in grave danger of living our lives apart from God, based on our desire to be seen as right and good, is this: How do we keep from being the older brother? Well the first thing we have to do is realize that all of life is grace. The Bible says, “Every good, every perfect gift comes from above.” From your family to your strengths, to your abilities, to your health, to the good things that happen to you, they are all gifts from God, and so, we need to be thankful; it’s God’s kindness so give thanks for it. And then, number two, realize that you are no better than anyone else. The Bible shows us that there is a radical equality in two things: in both our problem and our cure. Our problem is that we are all sinful and in need of a Savior and I am no better than the junkie living in the street or the wall street executive who is in white collar prison for having swindled all those people. My sin may be different, it may be in different quantities here and here, but I am in the same boat, and you are in the same boat of being a sinner. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That’s our problem. And the cure is the same for all of us as well. We all need Jesus. And the moment you say, “I don’t need to work on my sin” or “I don’t have any self-righteousness,” is the moment you say, “I don’t need Jesus.” You don’t want to say that. And then the third thing, realize all of life is a gift, realize that you are no better than anyone else and then third, learn to love the Father. Find your significance in the Father’s love for you and start to try to be like Him in the way He loves, unconditionally. Look at the overwhelming grace of the Father. Again, when the older brother throws his pity party and repudiates the father’s kindness, how does the father respond? He doesn’t yell at his son. He doesn’t belittle him. He reminds him of their relationship. “You are my son, all that I have is yours.” He reminds him of what is important.

Again, this is Jesus pleading with His worst enemies. You see, Jesus not only loves wild rebels, he also loves hardened religious Pharisees, and He loves them so much that He wants to set them free from the prison of performance-acceptance religion. He loves them so much that He wants them to feel loved and understand grace. He loves them so much that He died for them. Imagine a church full of people who are constantly thankful for the grace of God in their lives.

That would be a welcoming church, a joyful church. Some of those songs we sang earlier really embody that idea. “My one request, my righteousness, how I need You.” If we really live like that, this would be a welcoming place where nonreligious people would come and be themselves and feel loved and not judged. Where we could feel like we could be ourselves, where we could find joy in the midst of our struggles. The world and the church are full of older brothers and we need to extend them grace. But one more thing, let’s not let the older brothers of the world keep us from enjoying the goodness of God, because we’re going to have a party whether they come in or not. The kingdom of heaven is a feast, but it’s only entered into by grace. Jesus asks, ‘Will you come in?’ Let’s pray.

Father, we thank You that You do not leave us to our own devices, that You don’t leave us in our sin and in our misery, but You have come very close to us. You sent Jesus to be one of us, to live the perfect life and die the death that we deserved that we might be clothed in His righteousness. And so, Lord, let us remember every day that we do not come to You because we deserve You, we come because You have called us by Your grace and nothing in our hands we bring, but simply to the cross we cling as Jesus has made us worthy of coming before You. May we be moved by that kind of love, moved by that compassion to love those around us, to love the younger brothers in our lives, and the older brothers in our lives and welcome them both back. We pray that You would strengthen our love and compassion. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

We now come to the Lord’s Table. This supper is something that tells us about the past, the present and the future. It has all those time aspects to it. It tells us about the past because it symbolizes for us the body and blood of Christ. Jesus went to the cross for us, in history, and died a death that is given for us, and so we remember the past. But it’s also a picture of the present. It tells us that Jesus is spiritually present with us here, as His people come together to worship and gather together at the table. He is with us in a special way and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit He is working in and through the preaching of the word and through the elements to sanctify us, to make us stronger, to give us grace and strength for the journey of the Christian life. And then it also tells us about the future. As I said, the kingdom of heaven is a feast and if you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, one day you will sit at the heavenly banquet of the marriage supper of the Lamb and Jesus will feed us by His own hand and we will see Him face to face. And so, we anticipate that supper as we come to this supper and as we remember how Jesus took bread and after He had given thanks, He broke it and He said, “This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.” And after the supper He also took the cup and He said, “This cup is the new covenant of my blood, shed for the remission of sins,” and as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He returns.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ is coming again. And He has given His life and His love for you.