

“To Live In Light Of The Father’s Compassion Is To Live The Third Way”

In the poem "*The Road Less Travelled*," Robert Frost tells of a man walking in the woods and coming to the place where the road diverges into two distinct paths. The famous line in the poem is, "*I chose the road less traveled by, and it has made all the difference.*" The poem is memorable because we often think in life that we're presented with a choice between two divergent paths. That is often the case. But what if the two most obvious choices are not the only options. What if there is a third way? This morning as we conclude this series on the Prodigal Son Jesus teaches us that while there are two very common ways we try to make life work, the way to live in light of God's compassion, is actually an altogether different way in that sense a third way to live.

I was in Orlando at Reformed Theological Seminary all last week, teaching a preaching lab. I would eat lunch with groups of men or young couples preparing for ministry every day. I asked some of them, "*If I were to tell you that Christianity is a third way would that be a familiar concept to you or not?*" Most had never heard that terminology and were curious. But one student *said*, he thought the idea of a third way meant there is a sort of middle ground between two extremes that Christians ought to occupy. He had heard it used politically meaning something like Christians should find some way to compromise in all the divisive cultural issues of the day. That concerned me because that's not it. There are times to compromise in life and relationships but it's not always wise or faithful to compromise. The third way is not about compromise. The third way is an altogether different way.

Look at **Luke 15:1-2**. At the beginning of the chapter and in the parable that follows, there are three people or groups that represent three ways to live. 1st. There are the sinners and tax collectors who correspond with the prodigal son. 2nd. There are the Pharisees and scribes who are represented by the angry older brother. 3rd. There is Jesus and the Father. Jesus and the Father represent a third way that stands over and against two equally misguided alternatives.

Jesus' day and ours, the true way forward in our spiritual lives is often altogether different than the options with which we are most familiar...

**I. TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF THE FATHER'S COMPASSION,
YOU HAVE TO AVOID TWO DEAD ENDS, BOTH OF WHICH
CAN LURE YOU OFF THE ONE TRUE PATH.**

A. The first way to go nowhere good is the way of the prodigal.

We often run off to the far country in the search for satisfaction.

We think the way to find what we long for is to escape the controlling influence of the Father, God, religion, convention, whatever, to chase happiness on your own terms. This is such a well-worn deeply rutted path it is silly to act as if it is as courageously non-conformist or heroically rebellious. It's also naïve to imagine this path or "way" will lead us to the happiness or fulfillment for which we are longing.

We are all vulnerable to taking this path at least part of the time and from time to time. You may remember in an earlier message, I quoted Henri Nouwen. In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he writes,

"I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."

"Addiction" might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates society. Our addiction makes us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfillment: accumulation of wealth and power, attainment of status and admiration; lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. These addictions create expectations that cannot but fail to satisfy our deepest needs. As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in "the distant country," leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled. In these days of increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from our Father's home. The addicted life can aptly be designated a life lived in "a distant country."

To reject reverence for the Father and chase individual self-expression under the claim of being true to yourself is one of the major themes in modern culture. Untethered to God it leads nowhere good.

If we see the futility of the prodigal's path, what are we to do? From childhood, we learn opposites: up from down, light from dark, and right from wrong. So it is tempting to think that if the way of the younger brother is dangerous maybe we should do the opposite; get religious, keep the rules, conform to expectations. It's natural to think that way. But Jesus says, "no," that is not the way either.

B. The second way to go nowhere good is the way of the elder brother.

We are all vulnerable to taking this path at least part of the time and from time to time. This is the path of the scribes and Pharisees. What are they characterized by? On the good side, they are moral and law-abiding. Why then does Jesus call them out? Because, they are selective in their obedience to God and unfulfilled by the love of God. We can be meticulous about some things. We can be regular in their worship, and concerned about appearances and reputation. We can outwardly conform to expectations and norms. However, on the inside, remain out of touch with God's priorities like love and mercy, kindness and justice. You may not be in some "far country" outwardly, but inwardly, you can far from the Father's heart relationally and every bit as hungry as the prodigal in a time of famine.

In **Matthew 23**, Jesus called them *whitewashed tombs* because they were concerned with appearances but there was deadness, rot and ugliness on the inside. They were overly confident of their own narrow perspectives, lacking in compassion and full of contempt for others, but they did look nice. The inside and the outside were different.

I had a funny exchange with a man at a hardware store once. I needed something on the top shelf that I couldn't reach. He was very tall, well over six feet. So he came over and looked down at me and said, "*can't quite reach it, huh?*" He got it for me. I thanked him. He made some comment sort of teasing me about not being able to reach it, and I said, "*I'm as big on the inside as you are on the outside.*" He

looked at me kindly and said, "*It must be crowded in there!*" We both laughed, but you know there is a bit of truth in all that. Some men who are very big feel very small, and some who aren't all that big feel very big. What's inside and outside are not always the same!

Jesus said some people who look pretty good on the outside are not all that great on the inside. The inside is where everything real and fruitful has to *begin*. If we don't really love God the Father, receive, rest in, rejoice over, trust in and enjoy his goodness and compassion so that we want to please him and reflect his compassion in our lives, all of our attempts to obey him are superficial, compromised by our mixed motives, a burden to us and no pleasure to him.

Imagine a husband coming home grumbling, tossing a dozen roses he bought at the grocery store on the kitchen table, and saying, "*here you go, woman, it's your birthday, so it's my duty.*" Satisfying? Imagine a man acting like that and actually thinking, "*now, she owes me!*" Sometimes we relate to God a bit like that. Sometimes exactly like that. The grumbling of the religious as Jesus offers a winsome welcome to sinners, the anger of the elder brother, whose outward obedience is just so he can get what he wants, these things show us that path is not the true path. God wants more from us and for us.

So there are two very common ways of looking at life, and neither of them is the way of Jesus. Some say our society right now is deeply divided between various forms of these two basic approaches: elder brothers and younger brothers, the religious and the non-religious, the conservatives and the liberals. And, these two ways of life are so predominant that very few seriously imagine an alternative third way. If you criticize or distance yourself from either one of these tribes some people assume you've chosen to follow the other because each tends to divide the whole world into just two groups. The older brother types say the prodigals are the problem. They're doing their own thing and destroying all that is sacred. The younger brother types tend to say the elder brothers are the problem. They think that they have the truth to which everyone should conform. Each side tends to say if you're not for us, you're against us. Jesus says I'm *against* you

both because I'm *for* you both in a deeper way! I am the third way and the only true way. Are we truly hearing the call of Christ?

II. TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF THE FATHER'S COMPASSION IS NOT A COMPROMISE BETWEEN TWO IMPERFECT HUMAN ALTERNATIVES. IT IS THE ORIGINAL PURPOSE OF GOD TO WHICH JESUS CALLS YOU BACK.

In **verse 32** the Father says, *It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.*"

So one thing that is clear is that Jesus doesn't compromise the seriousness of sin. He doesn't tell the sinners, "*Wow, you guys are such rebels, thumbing your nose at society and going your own way. I love that!*" No! In the stories, he tells: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, he's telling us all that apart from grace, we really are lost! To be a lost soul, to face eternity lost, is a horrible thing.

A. There is really no compromise path offered by Christ.

Jesus never affirmed sinful choices or minimized their consequences. On the other hand, he doesn't just uncritically align himself with the more conservative but too-often hypocritical crowd either. He doesn't present himself just as a winsome ambassador for the religious establishment, trying to persuade the sinners to get more religious. He presents a different path altogether. The people who knew they were probably sinners because they were rule breakers were drawn to Jesus because *while* he *clearly* called out their sins, he *also* called out the shortcomings of the religious people who looked down on them.

B. Jesus calls us all back to a deeply God-centered way of life.

Remember we talked about the trend among some younger people to "deconstruct" their faith. Well, here Jesus deconstructs all our foolish ideas about how to make life work and reconstructs it all on a totally new spiritual foundation – *a loving relationship with God the Father who loves us, and with Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit who indwells us to comfort and change us.* That is the third way.

In the book *Deeper*, Dane Ortlund writes this.

Fallen human beings enter this world wrong. We do not look at ourselves correctly, we do not view God correctly, we do not understand the way to be truly happy, we are ignorant of where all human history is heading, and we do not have the wisdom that makes life work well. And so on. The Christian life – our growth in Christ – is nothing other than the lifelong deconstruction of what we naturally think and assume and the reconstruction of truth through the Bible. Picture a building that has been constructed by totally untrained construction workers and thus a complete disaster. – floors unlevelled, windows the wrong size, misplaced, colors that clash and the foundation not even level. That's us!

Sometimes we center our lives on the search for happiness on our own terms, we follow our hearts and chase whatever we think will satisfy us – Jesus reveals the emptiness of that path, and calls us back into a reconciled relationship with God who alone can fill us.

Sometimes we go the other way. We center our lives around the exhausting task of trying prove ourselves deserving of recognition and even blessing by conforming to expectations. Jesus deconstructs all that and reveals its powerlessness to change our hearts or fill them.

The truth is that God actually embraces and blesses us when we renounce all our futile man-made ways of trying to make life work on our terms and come to him with childlike faith in Jesus, humbly asking him to let us begin again with him at the center of our lives.

III. TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF THE FATHER'S COMPASSION IS THE ONLY WAY TO JOYFULLY FOLLOW JESUS.

Look at **verses 31-32**, *And he said to him, 'Son, (Remember we saw in an earlier message that word is more literally 'child') 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.*” The theme at the heart of the whole story is the incredible

compassion of the Father. He has compassion for prodigals and Pharisees. He embraces the prodigal and speaks tenderly to the Pharisee. It truly is amazing. Live in light of that.

In the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul prays that our hearts would be rooted and established in the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that we might be filled up to all the fullness of God. That's a good concise summary of the third way. Accept the Father's gracious compassion. Understand we all need the same saving grace, and we are all offered the same perfect love, and it's life changing.

**A. To be loved by the Father and to love him in return
is to walk in faith.**

If the prodigal had faith, he wouldn't have run off to find himself. If the elder brother had faith, he would not have been so angry and resentful. The whole Bible teaches us faith, trust. The life and sufferings of Jesus culminating in the cross, where he gives himself up for our sins, and the Father raises him up to be our Savior. All of this teaches us that we can entrust ourselves to him. We are saved by faith, and we live by faith. Without faith, **Hebrews 11** says, it is impossible to please God. In **Matthew 8** and **Luke 8**, Jesus asked his fearful disciples in the raging storm, *why are you fearful, O you of little faith? Where is your faith?* Look again at the picture Jesus gives us of the Father and ask yourself, do I trust in him? Will I trust in him?

**B. To be loved by the Father and to love him in return
is to walk humbly with your God.**

There is no pretense that we deserve his compassion or his blessings more than anyone else. It's all grace. Most angry, judgmental pharisaical older brothers think we just want them to be less condemning and angry. But the third way means we want them to see the reality that the Father loves them not because they are better than others but because he is full of compassion.

We want them to accept the Father's embrace, recognize their own need for mercy, and then enter the banquet and be grateful and glad. We all need that.

C. To be loved by the Father and to love him in return is to a deep and unchanging source of joy.

We may have trials of all kinds, but we know this: We are not alone on our own like abandoned orphans. We have a good and compassionate father, and we can rest in and rely on him. Christ in love died for our sins and rose again to be our Savior. God fully and lavishly embraces everyone who turns to him and trusts in him.

D. To be loved by the Father and to love him in return is to walk in the freedom of obedient faith.

God's compassion would not be compassionate, his mercy would not be merciful if it encouraged us to keep walking down the familiar paths that hurt others and lead us to the far country or leave us in the outer darkness. A vibrant faith inspires willing obedience. Our obedience to God's commands is not only gratitude for his kindness *to* us but trust in his wisdom *for* us. Do you believe he is full of compassion for you?

Conclusion

It is easy to see how countering the prodigal-son-like tendencies of our own hearts or our contemporary, very prodigal culture by telling a story about the compassion of the Father could seem as counter-intuitive to us today as it did to the Pharisees long ago. This compelling story stressing God's freely offered, completely unearned, and fabulously lavish compassion for sinners could seem like something likely to lead to all kinds of abuse. Jesus more than anyone is aware of that. But he the story. He only knows one Father, and this is what he is like! And Jesus know how powerful it is when we truly believe that. When John Bunyan wrote his famous book *Pilgrim's Progress* from prison, some of his religious friends urged him to not so clearly assure his Christian friends of God's unswerving love. *"If you*

keep assuring people of God's love," the opponents argued, "they will do whatever they want." Bunyan replied, "If I assure people of God's love, then they will do whatever he wants." To live in light of the Father's compassion is the soul-saving, life-changing, altogether different way of Jesus.

Amen

A Prayer Expressing our Faith in Christ

Father forgive us, we know not what we do. We blindly grasp for and grow angry about things that can never fill our hearts or satisfy our souls. We exaggerate our goodness, judge ourselves generously and others harshly. We renounce any claim to merit based on our good works or service and turn in faith to Christ alone. His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection is our salvation. We trust in him and thank you that in him we have forgiveness and new life. Amen

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Almighty and gracious God, my creator, and redeemer, you are also the gracious and compassionate Father. Enable me by your Holy Spirit to live as your trusting and joyful child. Deliver me from foolish delusions and trivial distractions and help me to sink my heart's deep longings into your immeasurable grace and love that I might be filled by your healing presence. Grant me opportunities to share the message of your grace and compassion with winsome boldness. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen