

## “What Our Reactions Reveal About Our Hearts”

I tried an experiment I heard about last week. I asked several people to point to themselves. All of them pointed to their chest or their heart. I was told this would happen, but it is interesting that when asked to point to themselves, few people point to their heads. Most people point to their hearts. As crucial as clear thinking, good thinking is to us. We sense that there is something even more essential, more central: our hearts. When we talk about responding to something or someone from the heart, we aren't talking about the muscle that pumps the blood that powers our physical lives. We are talking about the spiritual center, the core of our motivations, affections, mind, emotions, and choices.

The Bible places a huge emphasis on your heart. In **Luke 6:45**, Jesus says, *The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.* This teaching of Jesus in **Luke 6** is seen here in **Luke 15** in the story Jesus tells about the prodigal son and the elder brother. This is our seventh sermon on this chapter and this famous story. Because we're taking our time with this series, we can go deeper into some of the easily overlooked aspects of this powerful story. This week we're going to focus on the emotional reaction of the elder brother and what that reveals about the state of his heart. Of course, the point is that what was true for him is true for us too. ***The way we react to the circumstances of life reveals a lot about our relationship with God. We should learn to let our reactions and emotions teach us to go deeper with Him.***

Do you see how Jesus teaches this? If you are living the wild, party life in a distant country, or if you end up in one of life's pigpens, it's obvious you need to come to your senses and return to the Father. But what are the signs that you might be more like the older brother, outwardly seeming pretty good but inwardly pretty far from the Father's heart?

*At least two of them are pictured in this story. First*

**I. WHEN YOU ARE BITTER OVER THE BURDEN OF TRYING TO OBEY GOD, YOUR ANGER REVEALS YOUR NEED TO KNOW HIM.**

Look at **Luke 15:28-29**. When the elder brother hears his younger

brother, who has been so bad, has returned and been welcomed by the Father, he is so angry. His surprise was understandable. His indignation was inexcusable. His response shows how out of touch with the Father he is on the inside. He disgraces the Father by a public refusal to take part in the Father's greatest joy. He dismisses the Father's wishes even while he claims he has always served him and never disobeyed him. He forces the Father to come out and appeal to him. Even then, he refuses and reacts with bitter words. No expression of honor, just the blunt, "Look!" Which is like, "Look you!" Then this, *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.*

*This story was told to the angry Pharisees, but it is a warning for us all.*

**A. Bitterness can stay bottled up inside us while we go on looking pretty presentable. What we say is telling!**

Jesus once compared the Pharisees to whitewashed tombs full of rotten things. He said *out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks*. Those issues of the heart are reflected in the story of the elder brother. He almost certainly looked good enough. He was busy doing good things for the Father. But there was something unhealthy in the relationship. There are two words often translated *serve* in Greek. One is *diakonos*, from which we get the word *deacon*. The other is *doulos*. *Doulos* is a stronger word than *diakonos*. It is the word for a slave or for serving as a slave. That the word used here and it reveals the mindset and emotion of the elder brother's complaint. He is saying *these many years I've slaved for you. What have I got to show for it?*

I have sometimes caught myself saying something that reveals a bitterness I don't like to admit. What about you? If you look pretty good outwardly but inwardly are far from God, you will tend to say things like the elder brother. You'll say, *"I've just about had it." "I have obeyed you, God, and obeyed you, and I haven't gotten \_\_\_\_\_ what?* You see, what you think you haven't gotten are the things you actually love and think you need or feel will satisfy your life.

Sometimes we think we can give God an ultimatum of sorts. If you say something like this: *"If God doesn't answer this prayer, if God doesn't let this happen, then what good is being a Christian?"* That's not a good place to be. This is very real and not uncommon. A pastor I know said a woman once told him how her children had all turned away from the faith. She said if God didn't bring them back, she was walking away

herself and didn't want anything more to do with God. I can feel her motherly sorrow, but can you see how easily and naturally we can do what these brothers did? They both wanted what the Father could give them or do for them, but they didn't love him or trust him. The younger brother wanted some bad things, it seems. The elder brother didn't necessarily want bad things. But both of them want other things more than they want relationship with the Father.

The Elder's brother's words reveal that everything he had done for his Father was done out of a sense of necessity and not gladly or for its own sake. People whose hearts are far from God will sometimes try to keep God's laws to earn God's blessings and avoid his punishments. The result is that, on the surface, they seem like godly people, but they don't care much for God at all.

### **B. Bitterness reveals a failure to know and love God as a good Father.**

Jesus shows us that when we don't love God for who he is, the author of all love and goodness and truth and beauty, we tend to think of him as a means to an end. We can treat him the way the elder brother treated his father. We treat God as if he is the one who gives the orders you have to obey, so he will then give you the good stuff that makes life worth living. If that's what you think, then you will battle bitterness. The only good thing about that bitterness is that if you let it, it will reveal how far your heart is from God so that you can choose to draw near to him.

I know a man who took a music appreciation course when he was in college and had to listen to Mozart to pass the test. He felt that he had to pass the test so he could get a good grade in the course. He had to get a good grade in the course so he could get a degree. He had to get a degree so he could get a good degree so he could get into grad school, and he had to get into grad school so he could get a good job. Now He used Mozart to get money. But something has happened to him and Mozart over the years. Now he uses money to get Mozart. Now he spends the money that he makes with his good job, and why does he do it? Now, what does Mozart give him? Mozart just gives him Mozart! Here's the difference when you find something beautiful, it is its own reward. When you find something beautiful, you look at it, and you don't look at it so that you can get something else. You look at it because it is beautiful. When you have something beautiful, you enjoy it for what it is, whether a painting or music or whatever.

***All of this reveals how deeply we need what the prophets called new hearts and what Jesus called a new birth. John 3*** tells the story of a Pharisee who came to Jesus, and Jesus told him you must be born again. When we are born again, part of what is born in us is a new ability to see God's overwhelming beauty and majesty. The new birth leads to a new appreciation for the beauty of God in Himself. A love and appreciation not just for what God the Father can give us but for who God the Father is in Himself and in relation to us. No one knows the Father like the Son! Jesus shows us and tells us what the Father is like. He is good and worthy of our love and trust.

***With love for the Father comes a new mindset and an appreciation for the wisdom of the will of God and a delight in obedience to God. Psalm 119:164-166*** beautifully captures the relationship between love for God and love for his commands. *Seven times a day, I praise you for your righteous rules.<sup>165</sup> Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble.<sup>166</sup> I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I do your commandments.*

***The way we react to the circumstances of life reveals a lot about our relationship with God. We should learn to let our reactions and emotions take us deeper into our relationship with God. Now, look at a second closely related sign that you might be farther from God than you think***

## **II. WHEN EXPRESSIONS OF SELF-PITY EXPOSE THE STATE OF YOUR HEART, THOSE FEELINGS REVEAL A NEED FOR GOD.**

**Luke 15:28-29** *But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,<sup>29</sup> 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. Do you see the self-pity here? Christian psychologist and author David Powlinson, in The Journal of Biblical Counseling, wrote these arresting words: "Feeling sorry for yourself is one of the strongest, most addictive narcotics known to man. It feels so good to feel so bad. Self-pity arises so easily, seems so plausible, and proves so hard to shake off."<sup>1</sup>*

**A. We need God to help us see the truth about ourselves so we can let go of self-pity and be glad.**

One of the most ironic parts of the story is when the elder brother reveals his appraisal of himself in the midst of his bitter rant. Everything he says and does reveals the fact that he has little love for the father, no interest in the father's love for his younger brother, no desire to participate in this father's joy – and no joy of his own about anything at all. You have to wonder how could anyone this mean and miserable seriously claim such exemplary perfection for himself? <sup>2</sup>

But I wonder, do you think that way sometimes? Do you think, *“I live a good life, and my life isn't going the way it should! What's wrong with God? You know, difficult trials come into every life, and there are times when we can all feel overwhelmed. But chronic or recurring feelings of self-pity are a pretty sure sign that you don't understand the gospel and your heart is far from God. Because when you think that way, what you're thinking is that you deserve a better life than you're getting. There is no gratitude in your heart for what you have. There is no contentment and enjoyment in your relationship with God because you think you deserve better. You are saying you deserve better from God, and you could do better than God.*

Think about this: Jesus tells this story on the way to the cross. The gospel tells us our sin issue is so serious Jesus *has* to die for our sins and rise again, and we have to turn to him and trust in him to be saved from the wrath of God. If you believe that does it seem right to claim his saving grace and still be filled with self-pity? If you truly believe you are so sinful and your sins so offensive to a holy God that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ were absolutely necessary for you to be saved. Then you would say something a little more like this: *“I don't deserve anything, but through the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ, I am embraced by God, loved and accepted and forgiven.* Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are called to contemplate that, and it is important to do so because to do so loosens the chokehold of self-pity. To admit your own brokenness and rebellion and to accept the goodness of the Father. *It's important to know this and continually come back to this, not only for our eternal salvation but also for our daily lives.*

### **B. We need God to help us see the truth so that we can love each other.**

Look at what the elder brother says in **verse 30**, *But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!* In the grip of self-pity, we tend to fail at

compassion. Sometimes parents will tease each other. Mom comes home from shopping or work, and dad says, "your children aren't behaving very well," as if to put the blame on her. Suddenly it's not our children or my children but *your children!* The older brother does this with the Father. He says, "*this son of yours*" but it is no joke. It is an intentional distancing himself from his brother. Then, he brings up a sin, a sin that was never mentioned earlier, perhaps the one he knows and intends to be the most shameful and hurtful of all, *this son of yours who has devoured your property with prostitutes.*

There is no hint – not a bit – of sorrow, concern for the brother, empathy for the father, none of that. Self-pity has a way of so blinding us that we only see ourselves. We only care about our feelings, our felt needs, and what we want. What we think we deserve but are being denied.

**Illustration:** Jack Miller was a pastor who wrote a book titled: "*Come Back Barbara,*" is the story of one of his daughters who ran off and became the girlfriend of a drug kingpin. She was running around in mink stoles and green jaguars, and here's this Presbyterian pastor and his wife at home praying about it. The book is powerful because, at a certain point, Jack and his wife, Rose Marie, sat down and spent some time thinking about who they were in Jesus Christ and who Jesus was to them. And they forgave their daughter Barbara for the incredible hurt and humiliation she was causing them. Jack Miller used to say one of the problems with the book was that people would say to him, "*You know this is not a very helpful book to me because you say you saw how bitter you were getting and how angry you were, and you forgave your daughter. I'm having the same experience with my child. But I've tried and tried, but I cannot forgive my rebellious child for the incredible pain that child has caused me. You must just be a more spiritual person than me.*" But Jack explained: You know what, they missed the point.

What enabled Jack and Rose Marie to forgive Barbara is they faced the fact that the level of bitterness and anger they felt was not just because Barbara was doing bad things but because they were not sufficiently finding their life in God and their righteousness in Jesus. He realized that in his mind, he had been thinking, "*You know I'm a pretty good person because I am a good father and pastor. I've raised my children well, and look at how many of them have turned out great.*" When one of them turned out badly, it tore apart the means by which he thought he measured up. What he had to say, in effect, was, "*Lord,*

*I see now that the reason I am so angry at Barbara is because my reputation has become too important to me. It has become a source of righteousness in my life. I give that up. I'm sorry. You are my only true source of righteousness."*

The key to forgiving his prodigal daughter was his willingness to face his own failures, admit his own sins, rejoice in the Father's compassion and grace toward him and therefore forgive her from the heart. Parents in similar situations who read the book and tried to forgive but couldn't didn't understand. The key to the forgiveness was to repent of the false self-righteousness that had been undermined by their child's rebellion and then to find renewed peace in God and in Christ so they could forgive from the heart.

What Jesus was showing the angry religious leaders who grumbled over his kindness toward sinners was that something was wrong in their own hearts and with their relationship with God. In the end, he was inviting them to realign their hearts with his and with the fathers and to rejoice and celebrate the amazing goodness of God.

## Conclusion

God is better than we know and dare to believe. Look at **verse 31** again. It says, *And he (the Father) said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'*

This week, I saw something I had never seen before. All through this passage, eight times, the Greek text uses the *huios*. This is the formal word for "son." But here, a different word is used: *teknon*, which means "my child." The Father is intentionally pictured showing such tenderness, patience, compassion, and grace.

Almighty God is pictured as a loving father tenderly pleading with a hard-hearted and selfish sinner. He is pleading with him to come alive to the richness of the relationship that is being offered to Him and to come in to enjoy the banquet of grace and forgiveness, and fellowship that the Father has provided. You don't earn it by slaving for it. The one who tells the story died and rose again so that what the story merely pictures you and I can experience. You have to just repent and believe and receive it as a gift of Grace. Do that, and then let the love of the Father and your relationship with him fill your life and heal your

heart!

## **Amen**

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<sup>1</sup> David Powlison, *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Summer 2007, Vol. 25, No. 3) p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> See John McArthur, *The Prodigal Son* pp178-179