

Mother's Day
Two Sons
May 12, 2013

PRELUDE – “You Never Let Go”
Worship – “For Your Glory” / “Remind Me Who I Am”

Video – “Yo Mama Battle (of compliments)”
Mom's Recognition / Rick

Parent - Child Blessing

Feature – “Mama Told Me” / Offering

Now, I'm pretty sure that some of you who are here for the first time or are fairly new to NHCC, are thinking “I'm not sure that a song about whiskey, cigarettes and stale perfume is appropriate for church, especially on Mother's Day.”

Maybe, maybe not ... but you might be surprised to know that Jesus once told a story about a kid who spent many months – maybe even a couple of years – living that kind of a life. (By the way, that’s one of the things I love about the Bible and about Jesus – there’s no sugarcoating of anything; there’s no trying to make people look better than they really are).

Anyway, Jesus told this story (recorded in Luke chapter 15) and I’ve preached on it many times over the years because I think it presents one of the most complete understandings of who God is *and* shows off Jesus’ intellectual brilliance at the same. What Jesus does in this parable is simply amazing – so amazing that every time I study it and

teach from it I discover even more, especially as I read the work of other pastors and Bible scholars. The first pastor I ever heard teach it in a way that truly impacted me was Bill Hybels about 20 years ago. It was big part of the motivation behind the launching of this church.

Later, I was influenced by Kenneth Bailey and Tim Keller's books and recently I've become acquainted with several others. So what I am going to talk about this morning is not something I have come up with on my own. It's a compilation of what I've learned from people much smarter than I and also, I think, from the Holy Spirit as these insights have affected *me* personally.

Now the background of this story and

why Jesus told it is important to understanding it.

Luke 15:1&2 says ...

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

Jesus was being challenged on why he was hanging out with sinners. So when he told this story he was saying, in essence, “You’re worried about sin? Let tell you what sin is like.”

The Father & the Younger Son

A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, “I want my share of your estate now before you die.”

Luke 15:11 (NLT)

“Dear Dad, since it doesn’t look like you’re going to die anytime soon, can we just do the deal now? All the money that’s going to come to me when you’re dead ... I’d like it now. I’d rather have your stuff than you.”

And all the Pharisees and teachers of the law who are listening are saying to themselves, “that’s sin alright. This son is scum. You do not do this to your father.”

And in that culture (and it’s still this way

in many parts of the Middle East) they would expect this younger son to receive a rebuke and beating from the father. And if the father was unable to do it, the older son should do it because in this culture that's his role – to mediate between the father and his younger siblings.

But that doesn't happen in Jesus' story.

The next thing that happens, Jesus says, is that ...

So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. Luke 15:12 (NLT)

Note the plural there.

The older son, instead of intervening

and rebuking, also accepts his share of the inheritance. Honor would demand that he refuse but he does not. *Both* sons take from their father in a way that is dishonorable. And that's important to remember.

Jesus continues:

A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve.

He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The

young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

Luke 15:13-16

(NLT)

This kid gave up everything to pursue a life of extravagance and wound up in poverty. He started out feasting and ended up starving. He had his wild times and found himself in a pigsty.

It's a familiar story isn't it? So many people try to throw off what they believe are shackles preventing them from experiencing freedom and they wind up getting even more enslaved.

That's because freedom is a moral concept. Freedom isn't doing "whatever

you want whenever you want however you want.” That’s *anarchy*. Freedom only works inside of a moral framework. When you operate outside of that, the first thing you experience is a loss of freedom and it gets worse from there. That’s what happened to this younger son. And that’s what’s happening in this world today.

A lot of people look at all the evil these days – and it’s incredible. In just the last month you’ve got ...

- The Boston Marathon Bombings
- The full story of Gosnell murdering babies born alive in Philadelphia is coming out
- You’ve got the creep in Cleveland who abused those three girls for a decade

- And then there's the triple murder in Ottawa and the baby they can't find

And the list could go on and on. And we could add personal evils that each us sees and experiences that doesn't make the news. People look at all of that and they wonder "if God really exists and God is good and all-powerful then why does all this crap keep happening?"

Jesus' story tells us why: *God allows his sons and daughters to go against his will if they so choose.*

God did not create a world of evil. In the beginning the Bible tells us that he pronounced his creation to be "very good." And then He did an amazing thing: He gave a moral law to his

creatures which was designed to protect its freedom; to keep us and our world from descending into anarchy. But more and more individuals and more and more communities and more and more countries are rejecting that moral law, ridiculing that moral law as well as anyone who believes God and a moral law exists.

And the results are what they are. All this evil is not God's fault. It is our fault. God allows his sons and daughters to go against his will if they so choose. And we've chosen. Over and over again ... just like the younger son in Jesus' story ... who, at this point in the story decides that things cannot continue as they are.

*When he finally came to
his senses, he said to*

himself, “At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!”

And so he has a bright idea.

“I will go home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a mere hired servant.’” Luke 15:17-19 (NLT)

Some people think this is the turning point of the story. But, most likely it's not because the language Jesus uses here in describing the son's thinking is the exact same language that Pharaoh of Egypt used when God sent the plagues.

Exodus 10:16 records him saying, “I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you.” But he still didn’t let the Israelites go. His “repentance” only lasted a couple of hours.

And that’s the same thing that’s happening here. This younger son hasn’t changed at all. He’s just figured out a new way to squeeze even more out of his old man. As Glen Scrivner puts it, this is a pigsty plan to use Pharaoh-like repentance as the basis of a job application.ⁱ ⁱⁱ “Living as a rebellious sinner didn’t work, so let’s try being a slave. Let’s go home, work hard, clean up the act, and maybe someday I’ll have saved enough money to pay back everything I’ve lost.”

So he returned home to his

father. Luke 15:20 (NLT)

... thinking that the issue is the wasted money ... hoping he can manipulate his father into letting him figure out a way to pay it all back. But that is *not* the issue. The issue is ... well, we'll get to that in a minute.

Jesus continues:

And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Luke 15:20 (NLT)

Again, I can imagine Jesus pausing slightly at this point to allow the anticipation of what *should* happen next to build in the minds of his listeners.

Because this son has squandered his

fortune with gentiles, it's probable that something called a "kezazah ceremony" has been performed. A clay jar filled with bitter herbs and spices would have been broken and spread on the path by which this younger son had departed signifying that he was no longer welcome in the community.ⁱⁱⁱ And in some of the records we have of kezazah ceremony, when people try to violate it by returning ...

- They are seized.
- The men of the village form two lines
- They force the person to run between them
- And they are stoned.

And in those recorded instances, no one

survived.

So, as Jesus tells this story everyone expects this son to return to his death. That's what he deserves. However, that's not what happens.

Jesus says ...

Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. Luke 15:20 (NLT)

He has no idea what the kid is going to say or what he is going to do, but Jesus says that when the father sees him, he starts running ... which is why in middle Eastern cultures they sometimes call this story “the parable of the running father.”

And this is the *real* turning point of the story because, remember, the son believes becoming a hired hand is his only hope. But before he can say a word his father hitches up his robe and runs. Before the son can even open his mouth, his father falls on his neck and smothers him with kisses (which is the meaning of the original language). It's actually a very motherly scene if you think about it. This disgraced and rejected father, in full view of everyone in the community throws his arms around his son and offers him reconciliation and forgiveness before he can even open his mouth.

Now listen very closely to what the son says in response.

His son said to him,

*“Father, I have sinned
against both heaven and
you, and I am no longer
worthy of being called
your son.” Luke 15:21
(NLT)*

Something’s missing from the rehearsed speech. The part about being a “mere hired servant” is gone.

Why? Because the son realizes it’s not the lost money that matters to his father. It’s the broken relationship. And the solution to *that* isn’t his pigsty-plan pharaoh-sorry-repentance job-application so that he can one day pay off his debt. The solution is his *father’s* gracious and loving offer of forgiveness. And he is so overwhelmed by that offer and love that his hard-heartedness towards his father melts away. And he

truly repents. He truly changes his mind and his affections (which the meaning of repentance).

And this is why Jesus spent time hanging out with tax collectors and other notorious sinners. Remember, that's the reason why he was telling this story. *Jesus is the running father of this parable.* And he is saying to the Pharisees and teachers of religious law that “the wayward sinners of this world need to know that even though they have dishonored me” – remember Jesus is God in the flesh – “even though they have dishonored me, I love them like the father in this story. And I have come into the world for them. And will humble myself (as he did) and take their shame on myself (as he did). I will go to the cross as an atoning sacrifice for their

sin even before they think of asking for it.”

Friends, that is the heart of the Christian message. That is the God we are invited to love and worship and belong to. There is no one like Him. I mean, you and I didn't go to God and say, “we have offended You; please forgive us” and then He said, “ok, I'll make a way for that to happen.” No, before we even thought of asking for it, He sought us out and offered it to us. Have you received it?

When the younger son accepts his father's forgiveness, look what happens.

His father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house

and put it on him.

The father clothes him in *his own robe* and brings him safely into the community. No one will touch him. He will not bear the punishment that would rightfully be his because he is dressed in his father's robe.

*Get a ring for his finger
and sandals for his feet.
And then go kill the calf
we have been fattening.
We must celebrate with a
feast, for this son of mine
was dead and has now
returned to life. He was
lost, but now he is found.”
So the party began.
Luke 15:22-24 (NLT)*

Now, let me ask you a question. There's more to it, but *how do you feel about Jesus' story to this point?* That no matter how far you've gone, no matter what you've done, He will take you back with no questions asked?

It probably depends on your situation. If you've fallen into the pigsty and you've screwed up your life because you've been duped into pursuing anarchy instead of freedom, it's probably wonderful news. For a lot of people, this part of the story produces tears of gratitude.

The Father & The Older Son

But for others it produces ... grumbling ... which is what we see in the second part of Jesus' story.

“Meanwhile,” Jesus said ...

... at the same time as the father was welcoming his youngest son home and telling the servants to get ready for this big party and to invite the whole town (which is what would happen whenever a family would “kill the fatted calf” – I mean, you don’t kill the calf unless you’re planning on having this big bash and inviting all your family, friends and neighbors).

Meanwhile ...

... as everyone in the town is gathering to celebrate (even though they don’t quite understand the father’s unorthodox actions);

Meanwhile ... the older son was in the fields working.

Remember, Jesus said that there were *two* sons: a younger son who was a rebel and squandered a fortune and an older son who stayed close to home, close to the father and who acted responsibly by working the fields day after day after day ... because that's what older sons do, right? They show up and do their duty. They observe the moral law.

When the workday finally ended ...

And when he returned home, [the older son] heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on.

“Your brother is back,” he was told, “and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.”

*Luke 15:25-27
(NLT)*

At this, Jesus said ...

The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in.

Now, imagine you have invited everyone to a party and one of your children comes and is so angry with what you're doing they don't even come into the house. They stand on the street and start yelling at you. That's what's going on here. On the greatest day of his father's life, the older son throws a hissy fit; a very public embarrassing tantrum.

And the guests at the party are thinking, “Wow, this guy has the two worst sons in all of Israel. One shames him in the pigsty and the other shames him in the front yard!”

Which is worse? Neither. *They're both equally bad.* The older son is just as messed up as the younger. He also has a broken relationship with his father demonstrated by his reaction. He stands outside and refuses to come in.

So, Jesus says ...

His father came out and begged him to come in.

For a second time in this story, instead of ordering his servants to beat a

rebellious son for humiliating him in front of the whole community, he goes out in pursuit of his boy's heart. But in this case, he pleads with him; he tries to explain to him what he was thinking and doing; he begs him ... which, again in that patriarchal society was unheard of.

But this son's reaction is very different from his younger brother's.

Jesus said ...

He replied, "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one skinny little goat for a feast with my friends."

"Get the records," he's saying. "Get the

timesheets, call the accountants and you will see how much I have slaved for you.”

How is he relating to his dad? Not like a son to a father but like a slave to a slave driver. He is as far from his father’s heart in the fields as his younger brother ever was in the pigsty.

And he continues his rant:

Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!”

Luke 15:28-30 (NLT)

And what he’s saying, bottom line is “this is not fair.”

As I was preparing for this message, I came across quite a few blogs posts about this parable *where people agreed with him*. One person wrote:

“You know what the moral of the Prodigal Son story is? That your sacrifice is worth nothing and in fact it will be crapped on! Those who sacrifice their lives and put blood sweat and tears to serve God and obey his commandments are apparently not worthy God's attention, and they are only wasting their time.

Apparently, everyone will be much better off living sinful lives and mocking God. The more they hate him, the more he will love them! ...

And God sets a perfect example for this with all his love and attention directed towards the son who abandoned him, while undermining the faithful son. What a terrible and discouraging story for everyone who wants to be a Christian!”^{iv}

But is that true? Is the older brother being treated unfairly? Is the younger son getting a better deal?

Well ... remember how this story starts? “The father divided his wealth between his sons.” *The father has already given him everything he has.* He’s not been treated like a slave. He’s been treated like an heir ... even though he didn’t do the honorable thing and refuse it when his younger brother requested it.

And even though he has dishonored and disgraced and humiliated him publicly, his father has not responded with “like for like.” Instead, he’s gone out to him; he’s extended grace and forgiveness and love to him ... just as he did to his brother. Don’t miss this (especially if you identify with this older brother more than the younger): *there’s no special soft spot in the father’s heart for the “young rebel in the pigsty” that isn’t also there for the “slaving rebel in the fields.”* The father wants *both* of his sons to be close to him; to have a restored and right relationship with him. He wants both of them to participate in the feast.

... which brings us to the odd ending of this odd story Jesus told.

His father said to him,

“Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!”

Luke 15:31-32 (NLT)

And the reason that it's an odd ending is that we don't know what the older brother does. We don't know if he says “now that I think about it father, I have also sinned against heaven and against you. I have disgraced you. I am not worthy to be called your son and you have been so patient and loving and kind to me” and they go into the house and the party continues.

I'd like to think that's what happens. But I don't think it does because we know

who the older brother represents. He represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law. And, unfortunately, we know their response to Jesus' offer of grace and forgiveness for *their* sin. If there was a verse 33 to Luke 15 it would probably read "The older son in blind fury picked up his shovel and bashed his old man to death."

... because it wasn't the mob that nailed Jesus to the cross. It was the moralists who were unable to see that things like:

- slaving away for God without loving God;
- an entitlement mentality towards God that demands what he has already freely given
- and a hatred of God's right to show grace to the worst of rebels

... was just as sinful as wasting it all on wild living.

Conclusion

Well, let's wrap this up.

I think from Jesus' story it is safe to say that there are two kinds of people in this world: sinners (like the younger son) and slaves (like the older son). And they are both equally wrong. The immoral people are wrong and the moral people are wrong. They are equally lost, equally far from the father, equally far from the family and from the feast. Sinners are far away in the pigsty. Slaves are far away even in the backyard.

Some of us here this morning are younger brother types. We're pretty big sinners. We thought we would find freedom in "the distant land." We thought we would find it in throwing off restraint. But that has pushed us deeper and deeper into the mire. And this morning Jesus says "come to me" (even if you're still stinking of pig – you don't need to clean up first). And he will wrap you in his robe and all heaven will celebrate your return.

“Yeah, Rick, that sounds good but I could never do the whole Christian thing. I'm not a good person. I'm not religious.”

Thank God! *Jesus doesn't want to turn you into a good religious person. He doesn't want you to become a slave. He's*

inviting you home to a relationship as a son or daughter. It doesn't matter what you have been up to; how far you have sunk. His arms are open for you. They were nailed open. So if you're a younger brother or younger sister, come home.

Some of us here this morning are older brother types. I'm sure of it because where do you find slaves? In the field, close to the family, close to the feast but not in it. So many people in churches aren't truly in the family, aren't truly part of the feast. They live like a slave trying to prove their worthiness; trying to earn God's blessing instead of enjoying the fact that they belong to Him. They would rather be a good, upright obedient slave than a beloved son or daughter.

And if that's where you are this morning, Jesus says, "Stop slaving away. It doesn't matter what you've done in the field or how obedient you are if you don't love me first. So drop the shovel. Stop slaving. Come home and join the joy." His arms were nailed open for you too.

The issue isn't whether you're in the pigsty or the yard. The issue is the relationship you have with Jesus. So let's pray about that as we close.

God, I thank you so much for this truth. And Jesus, your brilliance is amazing here because we could mine this story forever. The insights about you and what you think about us are just amazing. The way you turn our logic on its head and say,

“you guys have got it backwards. It’s so much easier than you make it.”

God, some of us here are in the pigsty and we feel like there’s no way we can come back, and you’re saying, “Come on.” And some of us this morning are going to say, “I’m sorry about being in the pigsty, but I’m thankful that you forgive me. I don’t have to earn my way back in. And, there’s no way I can earn it. You’ve already paid the price for me on the cross and I thank you for that. I receive you as my Savior right now.” Some of you are doing that right now as we pray.

God, some of us this morning, though, we’re slaves. We’re good moral people. We want to do what

honors you, but dang it, we get ticked off because nobody else seems to be doing it. We feel like we're being cheated, and you're looking at us and you're saying, "I really want you to be my son or daughter. That's what is most important and then you can obey out of that." And, God, we've forgotten about that, and we're as far away from you as these younger brothers and sisters. So, God, we come to you this morning, as well, because we need to be forgiven of our self-righteousness and our arrogance and our presumption to tell you who you can and cannot forgive. We're so sorry for that. We need you as our Savior, as well. This morning, some of us good, moral, upstanding people, who've never

been near a pigsty, we're going to say we need you as our Savior, as well. God, in this moment, we're saying we choose Jesus – not sin, not slavery. Amen.

Feature – “I Choose Jesus”

CLOSING COMMENTS / Rick

It's a great thought ... choose Jesus instead of sin or slavery. But to really do that we need to understand more about Jesus and so, next week we're going to begin a short-two week series called “What Jesus Really Wants.”

I hope you'll arrange your schedules so that you can be here and understand more of what it means to be part of his

family.

A couple of other announcements before we leave this morning:

1. You all have heard me talk about the small group that Jetta and I are a part of here at NHCC and how meaningful that group is to me and how I want all of you to experience that same thing ... *here's your chance to get in.* A new small group season begins June 2nd and runs thru the first part of August. If you want to know more there is info in the program but more importantly, there will be a small group rally between services next Sunday where you can meet leaders and find out more information about specific groups.

2. Second thing is a very special event on Wednesday May 22 (program, verbal, TV)

Want to learn how to pray more effectively? Come and join us on Wednesday, May 22 at 7pm for an evening of worship and learning how to pray. This is a great opportunity to experience prayer in its many forms. Childcare is provided for birth through pre-K. No pre-registration is required.

3. Finally, a couple weeks ago our middle school and high school students participated in the 30 hour famine where they went without food for 30 hours to raise money for World Vision. Our goal was to raise

\$500 and the final amount was \$920. This will feed 3 children in Africa for 1 year. Yea God!!!

See you next week!

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://kingsenglish.info/2011/09/09/safe-and-sound/>

ⁱⁱ Scrivner's full message is linked at christthetruth.wordpress.com/2008/10/02/whos-the-daddy/

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://nelima.wordpress.com/tag/kenneth-bailey/>

^{iv} <http://christianity-rediscovered.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-older-son-syndrome-from-prodigal.html>