

Clearly, God
The Prodigal God
August 7-8, 2010

Good morning everyone. It's good to see you here today.

The Gospel of Luke tells us in chapter 15 that ...

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.

This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law (the leadership of the “Jewish church” so to speak) complain that [Jesus] was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! Luke 15:1-2 (NLT)

Let's pray together.

In first century Hebrew culture, sharing a meal with someone was a big deal. It communicated something much greater than “I enjoy your company, so let's hang out.” Sharing a meal with someone was a way of saying, “I believe that you are accepted and approved by God. I believe that He will invite you to the Great Feast of the Kingdom at the end of time.”

And because that's what sharing a meal meant, what Jesus was doing – eating with tax collectors (“robbers”, literally) as well as other notorious sinners (“hookers”) ... was *simply not to be done*. It was scandalous and offensive. So the Pharisees and teachers of the religious law decided it was time to confront Jesus. “Why are you doing this?” They demanded. “You – a rabbi – should know better!”

Luke tells us that instead of responding directly Jesus answered, as he often did, with a story; a parable – actually, *three* of them.

“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?”

“And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’

“In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!” Luke 15:3-7 (NLT)

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’

“In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.” Luke 15:8-10 (NLT)

Now, if you're one of those listening to Jesus, you're probably getting his point. You may not *like* the point, but you're getting it. Jesus is saying, "The Father is seeking lost sinners; that's why I seek lost sinners. I eat with them because the Father loves them and hopes they will repent and, at the end of time, join in the Great Feast of the Kingdom."

The point is clear. Yet Jesus tells one more story, one that ends with a surprising twist. He said,

A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. Luke 15:11-12 (NLT)

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)

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!"

"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)

So he returned home to his father.

And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming.

Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. 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 15:20-21 (NLT)

But his father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. 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, there's more to the story but let's stop here for a minute because I'm sure many of you recognize this as one of the most beloved parables of Jesus and the Christian faith. It's traditionally known as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Western culture has been so influenced by this story and by the concept of "the broken wayward sinner coming to his or her senses and returning home" that whenever we see some form of it (in paintings - some of which we've just seen - or poems and even movies), it moves us and may even bring us to tears.

So, you might be surprised to learn that the feel-good sentimentality that we feel was definitely *not* the reaction of those Pharisees and teachers of religious law as well as the many good moral upstanding Jewish citizens of

the day who first heard Jesus tell it. Instead, they would have been confused, they would have been shocked and then, finally, outraged at what Jesus was saying.

The Father & the Younger Son

And to understand why, let's go back through the story and look at it again, but this time let's put it through the lens of first-century Middle-Eastern culture; a culture in which the father of a family literally held the power of life and death over all the members of that family until the day he died; a culture in which honor and shame were (and in many places still are) the two predominant categories of everyday ethics. If an action brought honor it was considered to be morally right and rewarded; if it brought shame, it was morally wrong and it needed to be punished.

With all of that in mind, let's hear Jesus tell the story again:

A man had two sons. One day, the younger of the two told his father, "I want my inheritance now before you die."

I can imagine Jesus pausing just long enough to allow his listeners to digest the full-impact of this request ... *which is a grave dishonoring of the father*. In essence the younger son is saying, "You cannot die fast enough for me. So, let's just punch the fast-forward button and get to the good part where you're gone and I get everything that's coming to me."

And after letting the offense of that request sink into his listeners Jesus says ...

The father agreed and he divided his wealth between his two sons.

And again, I can imagine Jesus pausing slightly here and allowing his listeners to comprehend the full-impact of what he was saying. "What? The father *agreed*? That's not what he should do. This son is so dishonorable that the father should call the elders of the town, take his son outside and then stone him!" It was *that* dishonorable.

As the tension continued to rise in his listeners, Jesus continued.

Soon this son moved to a distant land, and there he blew his fortune in wild living. Then a great famine hit and he began to starve. He took a job feeding pigs, and desired to eat what they were eating.

This, too, would strike a nerve because, in first-century Hebrew culture, pigs were considered to be "unclean" or unholy. So, for someone to reach the point of desiring to eat what a pig was eating ... well, you couldn't get much lower or more shameful than that. And since the father didn't disown or stone the boy as he should have, the listeners were thinking this is exactly the fate he deserved.

When the young man finally realized how far he had fallen – that the servants of his father had more than he did, he came up with a plan: 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 hired servant."

[So] The young man began his journey home. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming.

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. They would have thought “finally, the father will heap shame and condemnation as he should have done at the beginning. He will say to him, ‘I do not know you. I have only one son. My other son is dead to me.’”

But instead, Jesus says ...

The father, filled with love and compassion, ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him!

“What? No shame? No judgment? And kisses? Embraces? *Running?*” (Only children and messengers ran in that culture). “This is unheard of!”

Before the son could finish his rehearsed speech, his father cut him off and said to the servants, “Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.

And all the listeners would be shocked even more because they know who owns the robe and the ring and the sandals. It’s the father. And he’s saying “take my best stuff and put it on this rebel son of mine.”

And 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.

And so, also, did the anger of the Pharisees begin to increase towards Jesus ... *because of what he was saying about God in this story*, for clearly the father represents *the* Father, God in Heaven.

So, let’s take a few minutes to summarize exactly what it is that Jesus is teaching about God in this story. Let’s clear up some of the confusion, because that’s kind of what Jesus is doing here. There was some confusion in the minds of the people who were listening, and he is saying I’m going to paint a picture here for you that will clear up the confusion about who God really is. And, I think there are at least four truths in what he is saying.

1. The first and most obvious is that God earnestly desires the return – not the destruction – of wayward sinners.

Remember, this all started out with Jesus answering the question of why He and his followers would hang out with hookers and robbers and other notorious sinners.

And in Jesus’ explanation, all three stories end the same way: with joy and celebration over the fact that what was lost – including a dishonorable son – has now been found. And, Jesus said,

“In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.” Luke 15:8-10 (NLT)

See, God desires the return – not the destruction – of those who have turned their backs and walked away from

Him in the most rebellious of ways. And I think that might be good news for some of us here today.

The second truth communicated in Jesus' story is that ...

2. There are no limits to God's love and forgiveness.

There are no limits to God's love and forgiveness. Even the most dishonorable behavior of the most rebellious sons and daughters of Israel, Jesus was saying, could be set right by God. And that was a little bit offensive, hard to imagine for first-century Jews. *But not only for them:* I think some of us just don't get this either.

Just think how you would feel if Jesus told this story about someone like Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein or some other well-known villain. To make it more real, what if he told this story about someone who has deeply hurt *you*? What if Jesus was telling the story and he said, "This person – your personal villain (you fill in the name) – this person wasted their lives in hurting and dishonoring God and everyone else, but one day he came to his senses. One day she repented and asked for God's forgiveness. And God's response was ... 'get him the finest robe. Put a ring on her finger. And let's celebrate.'"

A lot of us would say – along with the Pharisees – "no way; that's taking things too far; that person was *too bad*" – because our concept of God's love and forgiveness is too small, too limited. Oh, we may *say* that God's love and forgiveness can pardon any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing *in general*, but we struggle to believe it *in specific*. We might sing about hookers and robbers and people who scream and cuss and beat their wives being welcome to come home and be forgiven and enjoy the feast but really? Really? We kind of doubt it.

We doubt it, but Jesus says it's true. And I think for some of the rebellious sons and daughters that might have wandered in here this morning, that might be good news.

And there's more good news – or shocking news, depending on your point of view – in what Jesus is teaching here. Not only are there no limits to God's love and forgiveness ... not only are the most rebellious of sinners welcome to come to the feast ... *they don't have to do anything to atone for their wrongdoing before the sit down at the table.*

Let's phrase it like this:

3. While repentance is required of sinners, penance (making up for that sin) is not.

Repentance is required, coming to our senses and saying, "I have sinned against heaven and against you" is required. But penance, making up for all that sin, is not.

"Before the son has a chance to clean up his life," writes Tim Keller, "even before he has a chance to finish his speech about cleaning up his life, his father pounces on him in love. Nothing, not even abject contrition, merits the favor of God. The Father's love and acceptance are absolutely free."ⁱ

It almost seems a little dangerous, doesn't it? I mean what's going to happen if fathers everywhere treat their wayward children like this? Let them go off and waste the family fortune and then return without so much as a word about paying it back? What's going to happen to morality and civilization if there is no penance required, no accountability beyond "I have wounded you and I have ruined my life too. I'm truly sorry. Can I please come

home?”

Seriously - if hookers and robbers and other villains truly are welcome to come home to God and be forgiven and changed with no strings attached, no debt to be repaid, what does that say about this God?

4. It says that God is a prodigal. His love is recklessly extravagant.

... which, actually, is the meaning of the word “prodigal.” It doesn’t mean “wayward” or rebellious or anything like that. It means “freely spending everything; to be recklessly extravagant.”

And that, Jesus says, is the true character of God. He allows sinners the freedom to run away and waste it all if they wish. And He runs to the returning sinner even though running is undignified and unacceptable. He blesses him or her with robes and rings and sandals without requiring penance or restitution. God is recklessly extravagant in mercy and grace. This isn’t the story of “the prodigal son” that Jesus is telling. It’s the story of the prodigal father! It’s the story of the Prodigal God.

And I think for some of us rebellious sons and daughters here today, that might be good news.

The Father & the Elder Brother

Of course, I think you might also be picking up that what’s perceived as “good news” by broken rebels who want to come home is correspondingly perceived as bad news by good, moral, upstanding religious people ... like those Pharisees and teachers of the religious law who were listening to Jesus.

And knowing that this perception, that feeling was in their minds as he was telling the story, Jesus went on to tell the rest of the 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 this prodigal father had *two* sons: a younger son who was a rebel and who represented the sinners and tax collectors Jesus was running around with; and an older son who represented the Pharisees and all the good, moral, upstanding religious people of the community, all the people who would *never* run wild like the younger son had done.

This older son was in the fields working, Jesus said, just as he had done day after day after day ... because that's what older sons do, right? They're responsible; they show up.

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.

And, again, I imagine that Jesus paused here for effect, allowing the listeners to connect the emotions of this older brother with their own. (By the way, in case you ever wondered, Jesus was a genius. His ability to tell seemingly innocuous stories that have a twist at the end which reveals what is in our hearts is incredible. Read the Gospel of Luke sometime and you'll see what I mean).

Anyway, the older brother was angry, Jesus said, so ...

His father came out and begged him to come in.

Again, unheard of in this culture for a father to beg his son to do anything! But this father is a prodigal, remember? Radically extravagant in mercy and grace towards *both* of his sons.

But this son – this upstanding moral son – will have none of it.

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.”

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)*

Now, this scene is loaded with revelation about what's in the older son's heart; things you would never know by simply observing his day-to-day actions. He dutifully works in the field and he doesn't run off with the other half of the father's inheritance *which he could have done*. (Remember, Jesus said the father divided his wealth between *both* boys. He had a lot of wealth, too, just like his little brother, but he was wise with it). But even though things look okay on the outside, something is obviously not right on the inside.

So, let's take a closer look and see what this scene reveals ... but not just about him. This scene has much to reveal about a lot of us because a lot of us “good church people” are a lot more like *this* son than we are like the *other* son. A lot of us have the spirit of the older brother.

The first thing to notice – and you can't miss it because Jesus points it out at the very beginning and every word he says drips with it – is the anger. “*He became angry and he refused to go into the party ...*”

Why was he angry? He had done what was right and his kid brother had done what was wrong; he was stuck working in the field and his kid brother was getting a party. *It just wasn't fair! It's not how life is supposed to work!*

And that's the first thing Jesus' story reveals about this son and about a lot of us.

1. When life doesn't work as they think it should, "elder brothers/sisters" (the good moral upstanding religious people who don't do crazy rebellious stuff) become angry and bitter towards God.

They operate according to the principle: "If I live a good life, I should get a good life. If I keep the rules, then God ought to keep the rules. God owes me that much."

That's why a lot of lot of religious people will say, "I kept the Ten Commandments. I tried my hardest. Every day I was out there in the field working; keeping the Ten Commandments. I gave my ten percent to the church. I told people about Jesus. I did this, I did that, I served the poor ... and then my wife left me; lost my job; my kid got all messed up with the wrong crowd; I got cancer. It's not fair."

People who have an elder brother spirit get angry and bitter towards God when life (actually, God Himself) doesn't work the way they think it (or He) should.

Now, let's look at what else is revealed. The first thing he says to his prodigal father is: "*All these years I've slaved for you ... every ... single ... day. I haven't always wanted to, but I've done it anyway because I'm your son and it's the right thing to do.*"

And that's the second thing Jesus' story reveals about this son and about a lot of us.

2. Elder brothers/sisters obey because "it's the right thing to do" ... not necessarily because they desire to.

Their obedience to the moral code that God has revealed isn't because they love God and want to please God and make God happy. It's because, well, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it – even though I don't understand, agree or like it, that's how it is. Plus ... if I *don't* obey, I'll probably get punished somehow."

Now, that is not to say that there aren't times when we need to do what we *should* do because we committed to do it or just because it is just the right thing to do. But for elder brothers/sisters and those with that spirit, obedience to God is almost always – at the root – *a fear-driven, begrudging compliance*. It's rarely a source of joy and delight to just obey what God has told us.

As Tim Keller puts it: "Elder brothers don't really trust God or love him. To them, God is an exacting boss, not a loving father."ⁱⁱ

... which leads to the next thing this elder brother said in anger: I have served you *all these years* and you never once threw *me* a party.”

What’s *that* about? I think he’s saying “you must not love me like you love my worthless brother.” And that’s another characteristic revealed in this scene.

3. Elder brothers/sisters, those with that kind of spirit, lack assurance of their Father’s love.

We know it in our head, but it never makes it down to our heart. Let me give you some examples.

For those who have the spirit of an elder brother, every time something goes wrong in our lives, we wonder if God is punishing us for something we’ve done wrong.ⁱⁱⁱ “Should I have tithed on the gross instead of the net? Should I have homeschooled my kids. Maybe God wanted me to do this instead. Oh what if I misunderstood what God was saying!” as if God wants us to play a guessing game and if we guess wrong ... we’re in trouble! We just can’t see ourselves as objects of God’s mercy and grace because, well, mercy and grace are not fair. Mercy doesn’t carry out the punishment you deserve and grace treats you better than you deserve and *that’s not how life or God ought to work*.

Another example of not understanding God’s love and acceptance is that when other people give us constructive feedback, or maybe they just criticize us, it doesn’t just hurt our feelings – it devastates us because we can’t put that stuff into proper context which would be: “yes, I may have failed but I am not a failure. I am not a loser because I am loved and valuable in spite of it.” See, people with the elder brother spirit don’t have that context, so they’re destroyed by this kind of thing.

Another example ... when we pray, our prayers to God aren’t as much about enjoying and experiencing the relationship with God as they are about controlling the environment and manipulating God to “make life work” as we think it should.^{iv}

All of those things are evidence that we lack real assurance of God’s love in our life. It’s an elder brother spirit.

But there’s one more thing this elder brother in Jesus’ story said: “*This son of yours squandered everything on prostitutes.*” And the implication is clear. “*I would never have done such a thing.*”

And what it reveals is that ...

4. Elder brothers/sisters, those with that kind of an attitude, have a sense of moral superiority that produces an unforgiving spirit.

“I would never do what he did. I would never waste your money on prostitutes. I would never cheat on my taxes. I would never be unfair in my business. I would never take something that wasn’t mine. I would never, I would never, I would never ... <fill in the blank> ... not like he did or she did.”

That’s what I mean by moral superiority.

And that moral superiority always leads to an unforgiving spirit because if elder brothers and sisters have trouble believing that God's loving mercy and grace is freely given to *them*, then others who are morally "less" are even more unworthy of it. So they become critical and condescending, judging of everyone else.

It's interesting, some of the commentators on this story said that in reality what should have happened in this story is that the older brother should have gone to look for the younger brother. But his heart was so hard, he was so morally superior, he was so critical, he couldn't even see it. And what Jesus was saying is, "I'll be the true elder brother. I'm going to come for the lost sinners. I'm going to go for the younger brothers who are in need."

Yes, But Why?

Of course, the question at this point is why did Jesus tell this second part of the story? Was he trying to condemn the Pharisees? The good moral people like us? People who get angry when life or God doesn't work like they think it should; who obey not out of desire but out of obligation and fear; who lack assurance of God's love; people who have a sense of moral superiority and an unforgiving spirit? Was He just hammering on them?

I don't think he was doing that at all. I think he told it *to warn the Pharisees (and all the good moral people, like a lot of us) that they were in grave danger*. You see, unlike the younger brothers (the hookers and robbers and other notorious sinners) who *knew* that they were sinners, these older brothers didn't realize that they too were estranged from God.

In Jesus' story, the older brother *could see nothing wrong with himself because he was still at home obeying the rules*. But he was just as lost as his openly-rebellious younger brother because his heart towards his father was no different than his brother's. He was just as self-centered and a grief to his father in his own way as his younger brother was in his way.^v

And friends, I've got to tell you, this is where the gospel gets really offensive to people. It's one thing to say that openly rebellious sinners need to repent and receive God's grace and forgiveness. It's quite another to say that morally upstanding people who mostly do the right thing but occasionally get angry at God when keeping the rules doesn't make life work as they hoped; people who refuse to believe in the audacity of God's love and mercy and grace; people who are in fact repulsed when they discover the true prodigal nature of God – those kinds of people need to repent just as badly. It's hard to believe; it's offensive.

In fact, I've preached this message several times in different forms and almost every time someone will email me or talk to me and express a little bit of indignation at what I've said, "I've never done all these terrible things and you're telling me I'm as bad off just because I'm angry at God sometimes?" That is what Jesus is saying. See, we "good moral people" just don't see this.

But Jesus says we need to. That's the point of the story. Rule-keepers who don't love God are just as lost as the rebels who don't love God, and they need to repent just as badly. And when we do, the same prodigal God who welcomes and lavishes grace on the rebels will also welcome and lavish grace on the rule-keepers ... which brings us to the end of the story Jesus told.

Even after the ugly truth about his older, upright, moral behaving son is revealed ...

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)

Instead of words of condemnation and shame, which he could have heaped on this son, the father affirms his oldest son, reminds him of his love and invites him to be part of the celebration. And that’s where Jesus ends the story. We never know if this son accepts the invitation.

And I think Jesus did that as a way of saying to the Pharisees and the good, moral religious people “the door is still open for you. Your Father in Heaven is a prodigal God who recklessly pursues all kinds of sinners – from those who are openly rebellious to those who are quietly defiant – and in extravagant mercy and grace welcomes them home.”

And that’s the way I want to end this message. I’m going to ask the band to come and get into place right now to do a song that’s a message we all need to hear, whether we’re the openly rebellious or the quietly defiant.

Because, the invitation is the same wherever you are. If you’re a rebel and you’re sick of the pigsty and what is going on in your life, and you know that you’re distant from God, the invitation is to come home. No questions asked. No strings attached. No penance required from God in order for you to be forgiven and to be invited into his feast.

But, if you’re one of those elder brothers or sisters and you’ve been working hard in the field but your heart is hard towards God, you don’t get this radical grace thing, you think it’s crazy, and maybe today the scales have fallen from your eyes and you realize “man, I’m as messed up as they are,” the invitation is the same - come home. No questions asked. No strings attached. No penance required. In Christ you are loved and forgiven.

Let’s pray.

Endnotes

ⁱ Tim Keller, The Prodigal God, pg 24

ⁱⁱ pg 86

ⁱⁱⁱ pg 6

^{iv} pg 65

^v Pg 57