

A Tale of Two Sons

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 September 2022

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Well, as we said at the beginning of our time together, this is our launch Sunday where we launch a lot of our fall programming and fall ministries. And so because this is our launch Sunday, we're spending the next three weeks revisiting some of the core essential ideas and truths that shape our community, who we are and what we're about here in the D.C. area.

And so this week we're going to be looking at the most fundamental idea of all. The whole reason we're here, we're going to be looking at the Christian gospel. And in order to understand what we mean by the word gospel, we're going to be looking at this very famous story, this parable in Luke chapter 15 about two sons and their relationship to their father.

You know, about 20 years ago, I heard a sermon by the Presbyterian minister, Tim Keller, on this sermon that forever altered my perception of the Christian faith.

Even though I had grown up in and around the church, I became fascinated with this story. I read a lot of books about it. One of the most impactful books that I read was *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henry Nowen as he sat there meditating on Rembrandt's painting based on this parable.

And so this is a story that's been near and dear to my heart. I know near and dear to probably many of your hearts in this room. And it's one that we have to come back to again and again and again.

You'll undoubtedly hear those influences that I just mentioned in our time together this morning.

[1 : 34] But we need to come back to it again and again. Because if we miss or lose sight of what this parable is telling us about the gospel, if we overlook it, miss it, forget it, which is very easy to do, then we actually lose hold of everything that Christianity has to offer the world.

We lose hold of the reason why the gospel is, simply put, the best news for all people. And so we're going to look at this story this morning and for some of us maybe be re-centered on what this means.

For others, if you're here and you're not sure what you believe, maybe this is an opportunity for you to hear for the first time what the gospel has to offer the world and why it's so unique. So I want to draw out, first just kind of walk through the story and look at these two sons, the younger brother and then the elder brother, and then we're going to draw out some of the implications for our question about the gospel this morning.

So let's pray. Lord, we thank you that before we even bow our heads or open our lips, you're here. We thank you that everything that we do in this room, everything we do in our lives is but a response to your initiation, that you are a God who wants a relationship with us.

And we are here at your invitation. And it's your voice and your word that we long to hear this morning. So we pray, Lord, through your written word that you would speak living words. And that in those words, we would come to see face to face your word incarnate Jesus Christ.

[3 : 11] And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, let's look at this story. And Jesus begins this parable with the younger son. This younger son comes to his father and he says, Father, I want my share of the property that is coming to me.

Now, normally in this culture, when the father died, they would divide up the inheritance. And it was typical for the oldest son to get a double portion of the inheritance. And then the rest of the siblings would split what was left over.

So having two sons meant most likely that the eldest son stood to inherit two-thirds of the estate and that the younger son had a third of the wealth coming to him.

So that's what the younger son is asking for. Now, typically, this happened after the father died. So this request from the younger son is actually a grave offense.

It's a slap in the face. It would be horribly humiliating for the father. Because what this younger son is actually saying is this, Father, give me my inheritance now.

[4 : 15] You might as well be dead. I actually don't care about you. I don't care about whether you live or die. I want the stuff that is coming to me. Father, I wish you were dead. And so the original audience would have heard this.

You know, you can imagine all of the people sitting around listening to Jesus speak. Some of the sinners and tax collectors, some of the Pharisees and the scribes are all listening to Jesus teach this series of parables. And they would all be thinking the same thing.

Any self-respecting father would immediately disown this son. He would drive him off his property, and he would tell him never to show his face again. And he might even throw in a beating just for good measure.

So they're all expecting that to come next. But that's not what this father does. This father simply grants his request. One commentator said this is an almost unimaginable display of grace and patience on behalf of the father, because it would have been utterly humiliating.

The father simply grants his request. The son takes his inheritance, and he goes, and he squanders it, as the Bible says, on reckless living. And then a famine arises, and before long, the son has become so desperate that he's gone to work feeding pigs.

[5 : 28] Pigs were considered unclean for Jews to have any contact with. So this is ultimate desperation. He's so hungry that he longs to eat the food that the pigs are eating. This is rock bottom.

So the younger son comes up with a plan. He knows that his father will never take him back as a son. He'll never be welcomed back in the family again. He's burned that bridge.

But he thinks, if I can go to my father and convince him to take me on as a hired hand, maybe I can find somewhere cheap to live in town, and maybe I can make enough money to live on.

At least I won't be starving in a pigsty. And he's got his speech all planned out. He's thinking, okay, as soon as I get there, before my father can say anything or send me away, I'm going to say this. I'm going to say, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. And we can imagine him rehearsing that the entire walk home, right?

[6 : 34] He's walking down the road and he's rehearsing this speech. The father sees him while he's still a long way down the road. And he runs.

He runs. You know, Craig Blomberg, the New Testament scholar, writes, no older self-respecting Middle Eastern male head of an estate would have disgraced himself by the undignified action of running to greet his son.

Now, he wouldn't, no father would have run to meet a son that he liked. This son has humiliated him. And yet he breaks out into a run.

And the Bible tells us why. He's so overcome by compassion. This is total abandon. A total lack of self-awareness that comes from being overwhelmed by emotion.

And he embraces him. And he kisses him. You know, and the son starts to try to get through the speech that he's rehearsed a hundred times. You know, Father, I've sinned before. And the father doesn't even wait for him to get his words out.

[7 : 46] The father is already shouting to his servants, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his finger and put shoes on his feet. He doesn't want to hear the speech.

He's already forgiven him. He doesn't wait for the son to clean up. At a minimum, it would have been expected, it would have been customary for there to be a probationary period.

Well, we'll see if he proves himself. And then maybe we'll let him move into the house. But the father doesn't wait for any of that. He puts the best robe he has around his son's shoulders, who probably still smells like pigs.

He puts a ring on his finger, a symbol of authority. And he puts sandals on his feet. Servants and slaves don't wear sandals. Only family members would have worn sandals.

And just like that, the son is fully restored. Just like that. He's once again a member of the family with all of the rights and privileges, as though nothing ever happened.

[8 : 57] And then the father shouts out, Tonight we're going to feast! For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they kill the fatted calf. And this would have been the kind of party where everybody would have been invited.

So the whole town, the whole village was invited to come and celebrate what has happened. Now meanwhile, the other son, the elder son, has been out working in the field all day.

He has no idea that any of this is happening. He's walking back. He's hot. He's hungry. He's tired. He's sweaty. He's thirsty. And he's nearing the house. And he hears the sounds of music and laughter.

And you wonder, what does he think is going on? Maybe in the back of his mind he's wondering, are they throwing a party for me? And as I said, a party like this probably involved the whole town. So he probably heard it from a long way off. And he's walking up thinking, what good news has occurred? He asked one of the servants, what's going on? The servant says, verse 27, well, your brother has come.

[9 : 54] Your father has killed the fattened calf because he's received him back safe and sound. Brother's furious. He refuses to go in.

Father comes out. He entreats him to come in. But the brother says, all these years, all these years I've served you. I've never disobeyed you.

I've never questioned you. I've always done what you've told me to do. And you wouldn't even give me a goat. He's furious.

You know, in our society right now, there's this big debt, big debate over college debt forgiveness. I think some people can probably identify with the elder brother. I worked hard.

I saved all my life. I made all the right financial decisions. I was able to avoid debt. I was able to pay my debt off. And now you're just going to forgive it? I think we can kind of identify with that.

[11 : 02] He's furious. So the father tries to get him to come in. And he says, I've done all these things for you. You didn't even give me a goat.

And then he says, but this son of yours, and notice he doesn't refer to him as his brother, this son of yours who has publicly humiliated you and squandered your wealth comes back, and you give him the fatted calf.

It's a grave injustice. And what we need to understand is the fatted calf represented the wealth of the father. So this would be like the father selling off a bunch of the best stock in order to throw this lavish affair.

And as we said in the beginning, who stood to inherit the majority of the wealth here? Well, the elder brother. So what's behind this anger is, you're spending my inheritance on a party for him after what he did to you.

And the story ends here. And I want you to notice a reversal has taken place. A reversal in space. The son who was out of the house is now in the house as a guest of honor.

[12 : 08] The son who was in the house is now outside in the cold. It's a great reversal. Now, if we understand what Jesus is saying with this parable, it is absolutely earth-shattering.

Because he's basically saying everything that you think you know about God and religion and the way the world works is wrong. You are wrong.

The elder brother represents the good people. In Jesus' day, this would have been people like the scribes and the Pharisees who we read about in verse 2. They're listening in.

The scribes and the Pharisees. These are people who live morally exemplary lives. They're obedient to the law. They're devoted to family and tradition. They are genuinely good people. If we were to meet them today, we would be ashamed to compare ourselves to them.

They're genuinely good people. The younger brother represents the bad people. People like the tax collectors and the sinners. We read about them in verse 1 who are also listening in.

[13 : 14] These are people who had disobeyed God. They had betrayed Israel in the case of the tax collectors by allying with Rome. They had departed from the tradition of their families. They had chosen to live immoral lives.

So when Jesus started telling this parable, every single one of his listeners thought they knew how the story was going to play out. Jewish rabbi teaching the kind of thing that other Jewish rabbis had taught at the time, they thought they knew how the story was going to go.

Surely the younger brother would get what he deserved in the end. He would be disowned and forgotten, left to die in misery and squalor for his sin.

And surely the older brother would get what he deserved. He would be held up as an example for everyone to follow. Perhaps there would even be a feast to honor his years of faithful servants and obedience.

And at the end of the story, the application would be, all of you listening here need to be like this faithful elder brother, a paragon of virtue. And the reason that people would have assumed that, the

reason that we would assume it if we were sitting there, is because we all tend to assume that life works according to the laws of karma.

[14:27] All religions are essentially karma religions, which essentially say, good people at the end of things will be rewarded. Bad people at the end of things will be punished.

Eventually, you will get what is coming to you. But ultimately with this parable, Jesus is subverting the entire way that we think about goodness and badness.

Because by the end of this parable, the bad person who should be on the outside has been welcomed in as the guest of honor. And the good person who should be the guest of honor is standing outside in the cold.

No religion would say this. No religion, by the definition that we just gave, would say this, which shows us that the gospel isn't really a religion at all.

It's not irreligion. It's something else. It's something outside of those categories. And this is why the gospel can do something that no other religious tradition can do.

[15:44] It can actually change hearts. This is what we need to see. The older brother has been good all of his life.

And I mean genuinely good. He's done all the right things. Now, in our culture, living in D.C., in the age that we live in, goodness has all kinds of definitions.

Right? Goodness, according to this, or according to some people in our culture, might mean that you go to church and you read your Bible and you pray and you volunteer. Right? That might be goodness.

And the bad people, you might think of as the pagans and the atheists and the secular liberal progressives and the sexually immoral people. And those are the bad people. Then you go to another group down the road and they might think the exact opposite.

It's the progressive, open-minded people who are the good people. And it's all of those traditional religious bigots and closed-minded folk who are the bad people. Right? So, there's lots of different ways of thinking about goodness and badness.

[16:47] But according to every definition that we have in this culture, the older brother had been good all of his life. He had done all the right things.

But the question is, why? Why? Why? Why? His response to the father once he hears what is happening shows us the truth about his heart.

that ultimately His goodness is not motivated by love for the Father. Ultimately, He's after the Father's stuff, which means ultimately, if we draw this out, He's actually no better than the younger brother. They're both after the same thing.

They're both after the Father's stuff. The younger brother goes after the Father's wealth by rejecting Him to His face. The older brother goes after the Father's stuff by obeying Him perfectly and then demanding what he believes he is owed. The older brother's goodness is not actually motivated by love, but a desire for control. His goodness is actually a lever that He can use to try to manipulate His Father into giving Him what He believes He deserves.

And we see this in our own lives. As I was reflecting on that this week, I thought about my own way of thinking about God. How do we respond when God doesn't answer prayer, when God doesn't give us what we think He should, when we want something good from God, something that God would want us to want, and then God doesn't do it. And it's so easy to think, I have prayed, I have trusted you, I haven't taken these shortcuts, I have waited on you to act in my life.

[18:57] The least you could do, God, would be to give me this after all I've done for you. Right? That reveals our desire for control in our relationship with God.

An elder brother and a Christian can be identical on the outside. An elder brother and a faithful Christian can look absolutely identical on the outside. If you look at their life, if you look at the way they use their body and spend their money and invest in their relationships and the good they do in the world, they can look exactly the same. The primary difference between them is on the inside. The primary difference is one of motive. What is the motive behind the morality? What motivates your morality? You know, Jonathan Edwards, the great theologian, spent a lot of time thinking about this question, and there's lots of different places in his writings where he comes back to this question of motive. And in his writings, he summarizes the difference between what he calls common virtue, and true virtue. And he essentially says that most of the time our virtue is what he calls common virtue. Most of us are motivated by common virtue motives. And he says, you know,

most common virtue, behind it, you're going to find either fear or pride, or both. You know, so take an example of a virtue that probably many of us would like to share, the virtue of honesty. He says, what motivates an average person on the street to be honest, to want to be an honest person? And he says, well, on the one hand, it can be motivated by fear. You know, if you're a religious person, you might think, well, I need to tell the truth because if I lie, God is going to punish me. So I need to tell the truth.

If you're non-religious, if you're a secular person, you might say, well, you should be honest or people won't trust you. You should be honest because society won't work unless people are honest. Democracy dies in darkness, right? We can also be motivated by pride. Religious people might say, don't be like those sinners, don't be like those immoral people, be a good godly person.

[21 : 18] God wants you to tell the truth. And when I tell the truth, I can somehow assume that I'm maybe a bit better than those people who lie all the time. Non-religious secular people might say, don't be like all those terrible dishonest people who cause all the injustice and oppression in the world.

Be committed to the cause of truth. So whether we're motivated by fear or pride, these are all versions of the same thing. Edwards would say, we're all virtuous primarily because it's in our best interest to be virtuous. We've come to believe that it's worth being honest because more often than not, it's going to go well for us if we're honest. And I want to make clear that common virtue, even according to Edwards, is not a bad thing. It's generally good for society when people are committed to being virtuous, when people are committed to, say, being honest. Things tend to go better in society when people behave virtuously, no matter what their motives. And elder brothers can be highly virtuous people. And there are religious varieties of elder brothers, and there are secular varieties of elder brothers. Our society is full of secular elder brothers who champion all kinds of social and political causes. They try to make the world a better place, and they do a lot of good in the world.

So we need to say that up front and be clear about that. What's the problem? Here's what Edwards says, with common virtue, we have not done anything to root out the fundamental cause of evil. We have restrained the heart, but we have not changed the heart. And because of that, common virtue will always be fragile. It will always be fragile. The moment that a certain virtue becomes impractical, the moment we realize that the cost of this virtue is going to vastly outweigh the benefit, we tend to drop it.

Right? So think of the example again of honesty. Most of the time, I like to think of myself as an honest person. Probably you do as well. But then one morning, you're late for a very important Zoom meeting for work. And you're late because you slept in and you completely forgot about it. And you're scrambling to at least put a professional-looking shirt on. And you jump in front of your computer still in your pajama pants, fixing your hair. And you log on, and all the faces come up on your screen. And they're already mid-conversation on a topic that you should have been helping lead the discussion on. And what do you say? Technical difficulties. And you make some joke about how you'd think we'd all figure this out by now. And you tell a lie. Now, why do you do that? You didn't wake up that morning and think, I'm going to lie to the first people I see today. No, you woke up thinking, I'm an honest person. And then before you know what's happening, a lie is tumbling out of your mouth.

[24 : 31] Now, why? It's because in that moment, the cost-benefit didn't play out. You realize, you know, I could tell the truth that I slept in and I'm wearing pajama pants. But that's going to not go well for me professionally. And it might actually be better for me in this moment just to tell a little white lie. It will actually benefit me more. And so you, an honest person, told a lie because your virtue is fragile. You're not nearly as honest as you think you are.

Right? So then Edwards goes on and he asks, well, if that's just common virtue, then what is true virtue? What is true virtue? And he says, true virtue is when you are virtuous not because it benefits you, not because it makes you feel superior, but because you are so smitten by the beauty of God and His character. You are so smitten by God's heart love. It's when you come to love virtue not for your own sake, but for God's sake. It's when you, it's when you love God so much that you want to be what He wants you to be.

That's true virtue. Now, how do we get that in our hearts? How do we get that kind of love in our hearts? That kind of delight in God that would become a wellspring of virtue? And Jesus is saying we essentially need three things.

First, if we look at this parable, we need to realize that our heavenly Father is pursuing us with His love right this minute. Your heavenly Father is pursuing you with His love right this minute.

The Bible says we can only come to love God after we have experienced His love for us. We love because He first loved us. And we see that in the Father in this parable. Throughout this parable, this Father has one single aim, to have both of His sons in His embrace. That is all He wants.

[26 : 54] Even when they disrespect Him, even when they humiliate Him, even when they reject Him in their different ways, He pursues them. He goes out to them. He entreats them. He embraces them.

The point is that God is always pursuing us. He is always inviting us. He is always entreating us to respond to the love that He is pouring into our lives.

And He's doing it right now as we sit here. So, we need to realize that our heavenly Father is pursuing us with His love. Our ability to love Him in the way that Edwards talks about flows out of that love that He pours into our lives. Number two, we need to repent not only of our badness and our sin, which the Bible says is bad. Sin is bad. God hates sin. We saw that in the Psalm that we read earlier.

God hates sin. He wants to root it out of us. We need to repent not only of our sinfulness, our badness, but we also need to repent, in many cases, of our goodness.

Are you saying, don't be good? No. Younger brothers are alienated from God because of their sins, because of their immorality, because they live in the world that God made and they ignore Him.

[28 : 17] And that's a slap in God's face. It's us saying to God, I don't want you. I just want your stuff. I wish you were dead. But older brothers are alienated from God because of their righteousness, because it is a self-manufactured righteousness. And what that means is that elder brothers don't actually believe that we need God for anything. We don't need God's mercy. We don't need God's forgiveness. We simply need God to be on call, and when we want it, to give us what we're owed.

If anything, elder brothers tend to believe, God actually might need me or more people like me in the world. So, elder brothers need to repent of their desire to be their own source of salvation, their own source of righteousness. And this is important for us as a church, as we think about our vision and the culture of Church of the Advent. Churches tend to be very good at turning younger brothers into older brothers.

Elder brothers tend to occupy leadership positions. They tend to be pastors. They tend to sit on boards and vestries. They tend to be ministry leaders. They tend to be people that are brought up front and held up as examples to follow because human beings really haven't changed that much in the last 2,000 years.

Churches tend to be pretty good at turning younger brothers into elder brothers. A gospel-centered church, right? For Advent to be a gospel-centered church, we have to minister to both.

We have to preach the gospel to the sinfulness of younger brothers, and we have to preach the gospel to the self-manufactured righteousness of the elder brothers. And we need to always do both all the time in everything we do, inviting everyone into the saving embrace of God's grace, inviting everyone to let go of all of the ways that we try to live in God's world apart from Him.

[30 : 26] That's true repentance. Abandoning our attempt to live lives as righteous people apart from Christ. So, we need to repent not only of our badness but our goodness. And that comes after we've recognized that God is pouring His love into our lives. The last thing we need is that we need to receive the lavish grace, the lavish grace of Jesus Christ. Notice that the Father doesn't even let the Son get the words out before He embraces Him. There's been so much debate, did the Son really mean it?

Is this real repentance or is this more about self-interest because He wants something to eat? Is He genuine or not? Jesus deliberately doesn't answer that question because He wants our focus to be drawn not to the heart of the sinner but to the heart of God. Why are we forgiven? Is it because our repentance is genuine? No, it's because God's eternal nature is always to have mercy.

That's why we're forgiven. It's because God delights in forgiving sinners. And when He sees even the slightest inkling of an opening in your heart, He rushes in. And before you even know what's happening, He is scooping you up. He's kissing you. He's covering your sin with His robe of righteousness, Jesus' robe. He's putting a ring of sonship on your finger, Jesus' ring. He's putting sandals on your feet because He's adopting you as His children alongside His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

And then He is shouting, let the festivities begin. And the Bible says that all of heaven resounds with shouts of joy and praise when one single sinner comes home. All of heaven breaks out in song when one person comes home. And the cry goes out, let the party begin. Let the celebration begin. And guess what? There is already celebration happening in the heavens. Why? Because instead of a fatted calf, a lamb has been slain, the lamb has been slain. Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, who gave His life on the cross to cover our sin, the sins of younger brothers, the sins of elder brothers. And now the door is open wide. The party is underway. The invitation has gone out to all people everywhere.

It is time to come home. It is time to come home. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You. And we stand in awe of this. Give us the grace to come in. In Jesus' name, amen.