

Prodigal Son

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Date: 16 June 2019

Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] Luke 15 and verse 20, we read these words. While he, the son that is, was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. I guess those of us who are used to reading the Bible at various times know this story only too well.

I'd never forgotten some years ago in church at a family service, I was doing a Q&A; with the children. I said, who was sorry when the fatted calf came home?

Of course, I wanted the answer, the elder son. The child stuck his hand up, said, yes. What's that? He said, the fatted calf. I guess there are some subjects in life that everybody has an opinion on.

Right now, I guess Brexit would take the limelight for that, but we Brits are good at talking about the weather. Everybody has an opinion about the weather.

[1 : 13] When you go to Australia and you say to somebody, it's a nice day, isn't it? They're like, you what, mate? It's just not what they talk about there. But of course, everybody has an idea about parenthood.

I've noticed this. I've noticed that the generations all have ideas. In fact, even people who do not have children have ideas about parenting, especially when they're in a restaurant or on a coach or something like that.

And of course, today is Father's Day. You guessed that. My own experience of Father's Day has been mixed.

I mean, for the majority of my life, I'll be quite honest with you, I never heard of it. And then American marketing got to work, and suddenly it became before my eyes.

I have five children. Two out of five have remembered it's Father's Day thus far. Not that I'm bitter. My own father was challenging.

[2 : 28] Throughout my teenage years, his constant refrain to me was, you're a dead loss. And actually, I pretty well was, to be quite honest with you. So on Father's Day, when I'm thinking about, well, what can I thank God for, for my dad?

I do have something I'm very grateful to my dad for. He taught me to be resilient. I'm a kind of chumba-wumba-style Christian, in that I get knocked down, I get right up again.

And so, we come to this amazing story of the prodigal son, or the lost son, as the modern translations of the Bible choose to call it.

And the first thing you need to understand about this story is, that the request of the younger son to have his share of the property was truthfully outrageous.

You could not insult your father enough, other than by asking him for your share of the estate before you died.

[3 : 43] In fact, people had tried that with their fathers before, and the response of the family was, we will now regard you as dead.

And you get a little bit of that in the story later on, don't you? After the son comes back, the father says, my son who was dead is now alive. Back in those days, you went to ask your dad for your share of the property before you were dead.

You were dead already. So, the request was entirely outrageous. And even more strange is the fact that the dad requested it.

I mean, I have one son, and I tried to imagine what my response would be if he said, Dad, could I have my share of your overdraft now? This is a story which in Western tradition, in many ways rightly, has focused on something really important, and it's this.

And of course, this story never actually happened. It's a parable. It's supposed to teach truth. And one of the central truths that the Western church is focused on is the idea that this father is very

loving and forgiving, even in the face of extreme provocation.

[5 : 14] Well, that's what every Christ follower in this church believes, that God is ultimately a good God. And despite our behaviors, still can find room in his heart to love us.

Tim Keller, great preacher from the USA, has a different take. He takes the more Hebrew approach to it, and he says this parable is really about the two fundamental ways that you can alienate yourself from God.

On the one hand, it's the younger son. The son who decides, he's not going to play by the rules, he's going to do it his way. He's going to go out into the world, and he's going to live a life of hedonism, and he's going to, metaphorically speaking, make an unpleasant gesture towards the rules.

And of course, the story ends with, sorry, that aspect of his life ends with him sharing food with pigs. I have never eaten with pigs. Occasionally I've thought it, but I've never actually eaten with pigs. But, I can't imagine anything more degrading than that, can you?

[6 : 50] And in that degradation, here's a kind of Holy Spirit moment. Did you notice that very telling verse in our text? He came to his senses.

You want to alienate yourself from God? You do life your way. Frank Sinatra sang, and it's now played at people's funeral services, unbelievably.

I did it my way. You want to do life your way? You will inevitably end up alienated from your Father in heaven. But then, there's another way we can alienate God, which is represented by the older son.

He represents, well, he represents, honestly, a lot of those of us who go to church. He represents somebody who plays it by the book, who keeps the rules, who somehow thinks that by keeping himself the rules, he's earning special favor with God, and therefore, more and more, he has less love in his heart for those who don't play it by the book.

And he becomes self-righteous and judgmental. You get that, don't you, in our story. All these years, I've been slaving for you, said the elder son, and never disobeyed your orders.

[8 : 22] Yet, you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. Keller says, this type of person sits in church Sunday by Sunday with a shriveled soul and doesn't even know it, and actually thinks it's justifiable to look down their noses at the rest of the world.

And they expect favor with God for behaving like that. Two fundamental ways you can alienate yourself from God if you want to.

One is by being judgmental of those who don't keep the rules. The other sort of the people who don't keep the rules and just lead their lives lead into degradation. How tragic and how sad.

What can we learn from this? Well, the first thing is, there comes a point in your life when you need to have a Holy Spirit moment and come to your senses and decide what kind of life you want.

Do you want to do it your way? And isn't, I mean, that is a terrible temptation. I would say before I gave my life to Christ, there was one person in my life, it was called me.

[9 : 45] Paul put it like this, he said, we dissatisfied the desires of our flesh, our earthly lusts. If I was a Christian, I didn't know any other rules to play by.

You do that, you alienate yourself from God. There comes a moment. I don't know, this may be your moment today, maybe even some of you need to come to your senses and allow the Holy Spirit to prick your conscience so that you might make a move.

And the second thing we note in the story is what's the right move to make for the younger son and for the older son and the move is this, he threw himself on the grace of his father.

You know what he said? He said, I'm going to go and see my dad. I'm going to say to him, Dad, I know I am no more worthy to be called your son.

But if you'll have me back, don't have me back as a son, have me back as a hired hand on your estate. Just give me a chance, will you? You? See, the way to avoid either becoming the younger son or the elder son if you are the younger son and the way to stop being the older son if you're the older son is to remember that this God is a God of grace.

[11 : 28] His love is deep love, it's compassionate love our story tells us, but it's the kind of love that's shown to you when you don't deserve it. That's why it's called grace and that's why you need it because you can't do anything to earn that love of God.

God is love, said John in his epistle. That means, literally, God cannot not love you. But he loves you even though you don't deserve it and if you choose to turn your back on him, you will end up

somewhere along the line with a messed up life.

What do you need to do? Go to the throne of grace and throw yourself upon it. But if you're the kind of person who has strong morals, you're the kind of person who's happy to quote the Bible at people, if you're the kind of person who owns a Bible as big as a paving slab, and you're prepared to go around town beating people around the head with it till they submit, and you have a very low view of people who don't keep the rules, I think you need to do the same thing.

I think you need to come back to the throne of grace and remember who you are. you are a forgiven sinner. You have no right to go around the planet judging other people and being self-righteous and feeling great.

And how horrible when that manifests itself in the church. The place where the love of God should be shown to people who don't deserve it.

[13:22] And the third thing that's amazing about this story is the father welcomes him home.

Even when he was a long way off, his father saw him. It was in the days before very focal spectacles.

His father saw him. And he gets out his best robe. A mark of great honor.

He takes the ring of his finger and he gets the fatted calf out of the shed, poor thing. And there's a party.

You remember elsewhere Jesus said, when one sinner repents, there's a party in heaven. It is amazing that however much we humans test God, however much we provoke him, however much we choose to do things our way or we sit in churches judging others, at the moment we come to our senses, God says, you know what?

[14:46] I'm going to throw a party. That's going to be in your honor. I try to imagine, I mean this is not a bad litmus test for those of you who are Christ followers, right?

Try to imagine, suppose in Cleveland there was a very notorious person who lived recklessly and lived sinfully and ended up living a very degraded life and became a menacing kind of beggar downtown and was in a...

You should ask yourself this. If Clive bumped into him in the street and prayed with him and this person had a Holy Spirit moment in the middle of the high street and Clive brought him to church on Sunday and said, you know what?

We're staying on afterwards because we're going to throw a party for this guy because this fellow who was dead is now alive. How many of you would come?

How many of you would throw your hats in the air? How many of you would go out your way to help this person get back on their feet? Well, I know there are some people out there who really would do that.

[16:04] I know there are some people who'd even bring their musical instruments along to make the party go better. And maybe a bottle of Let me just say for you sensitive people a bottle of squash.

You can see can you not? Why Tim Keller says this story is about the Father's love but it's also about our human behaviors and the best way to alienate God if you want to.

But of course to go back to the Western churches tradition you have to marvel at the Father's love. And dance we need to listen up about this stuff.

One of the first things that strikes me about this story and this is such a horrendous thing for all parents not just dads but for mums as well. When you get to a moment where your child's behavior has been so difficult has been so disruptive has so wrecked your family life has made it hard for siblings etc. etc.

That love sometimes demands that you've got to let go. The son came to the father insulted him greatly said give me my share of the stuff and the father did let him go.

[17:34] Same kind of thing happened on that boat wasn't it that Jonah set sail on because Jonah was supposed to go to Nineveh and he decided I'm not doing that I'm going to Tarshish so he gets on a boat going exactly the opposite direction and they run into a storm and the mariners on the boat saying whose fault is this and Jonah runs up and the mariners these must have been gracious pagan people they're a little nervous about throwing him overboard so that the stone right but in the end for the greater good of Jonah they had to throw him off the boat into a turbulent sea I cannot answer this question for you but I know that for some of you you'll have had to come to a point in your lives where you have to decide is loving my child occasionally about throwing him off the boat but if that love sometimes needs to let go that love needs to retain hope

I guess in our story in the father's mind there must always have been the hope hope that his son might come home you know why for those of you who are stuck in your sin for those of you who have decided you're going to live life your way I think your father in heaven retains hope that you might have a moment when you come to your senses and decide that you will return home what I love about the love about the love of the father in this story is it was so pregnant with risk some of you are sitting thinking if that was my son coming home after spending a bunch of money I wouldn't be sure he wasn't coming home asking for a bit more not this father this father before he even knows why his son is coming back gets out his robe and his ring and throws a party and in our text today it says he put his arms around the child literally what that means is he opened his arms wide to his child this story never happened it's a parable it's not history but my goodness it speaks straight into the heart of our human situation does it not for surely the climax of the whole gospel is about a God who opens his arms on a cross and the moment we respond to that death that sacrificial death the moment we respond to God's grace in faith on the cross of Calvary Bible says there's a party in heaven and your name is on that party this story takes us to the heart of the human condition God won't force anybody to come to their senses won't force anybody to throw themselves on the throne of grace but whether you are the younger child or whether you are the older child the remedy is the same throw yourself throw yourself on the throne of grace and you will find that the love of God is higher broader deeper than you could ever imagine and you will discover that your life can be transformed more into the likeness of the son Jesus and you really can start to become the person that God wants you to be when he was still far off says the father saw him and was filled with compassion for him he ran to his son threw his arms around him and kissed him the older brother hears what's happened and becomes angry the younger son came to his senses the older son doesn't and the difference is utterly amazing