

The story of a father and two sons

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Date: 09 April 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Well, when speaking to God, Jesus always called God Dada, Father, except once.

We're about to hear a story that Jesus told. We've already heard it in the kids' talk. We're going to hear what Jesus said through the word as well. And it's a story of father and two sons.

And we're told that listening to this story, there's two groups of people listening in when Jesus first said this. There were sinners who had clearly broken God's rules, who thought they could find fulfillment in life by making their own rules.

And then there was the devoutly religious types who thought they could find fulfillment in life by keeping God's rules. And Jesus is saying both groups have a wrong picture of God.

So as we hear this story, I hope we're all prepared to have our view of God challenged by this story. So I'm going to invite James up to read us part one, and then I'll say a few more words.

[1 : 1 4] So we'll be reading from Luke 15. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

And he said, There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me. And he divided his property between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country.

And he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into the fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate.

And no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread? But I will perish here with hunger.

[2 : 2 0] I will arise and go to my father. And I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.

For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Well, let's imagine a family-owned farm.

It's been passed down generation to generation, and we hear the younger son say to his father, Father, give me my share of the property. Now, you know as well as I do, plenty of families argue over the will when someone dies.

[3 : 29] But do you hear what he's saying? To ask for this while his dad is still alive is to wish him dead. It's to go, I want your stuff, not you.

Now, that would get the blood boiling in anyone, right, in any father today. But in ancient Middle Eastern culture back then, to have your honour so blatantly offended like that, any self-respecting man would have just cut him from the family, kicked him out, and said, you're not getting anything.

Get out. So as shocking as the request is, like it should shock us that a son would treat a dad like this, what's more shocking is the father's response.

He divided his property between his sons. His life was bound up with the land.

I think our indigenous brothers and sisters understand this better, that it's not so much that the land belonged to him, it's more that he belonged to the land. So the word used here is actually he divided his life between them.

[4 : 41] He didn't tear shreds off his son. This father bears the pain of rejected love and he tears himself apart.

And then this younger son, thinking he can have a better life, making his own rules, takes his wealth as far away from the family as possible and lives in self-indulgence.

And of course it eventually runs out. If you live for things that can't last, they don't last. It runs out. A feminine hits.

And his actions had cut himself off from all true family because of his self-indulgence and he ends up alone. No one will give him anything.

Now I think self-indulgence, it can't end in any other place. If you put yourself before family, you put yourself before community, you put yourself before God, when we lose everything, of course we end up alone.

[5 : 52] It's in hard times that we feel how empty life is when we live for things that don't last. So I'm wondering, have you experienced rock bottom yet?

Have you hit rock bottom like this son did? There's some things in life that just come from left field and things you've been building in life on just get stripped away.

Have you hit rock bottom before? Maybe that's what's prompted you to come to church today. If it is, I hope you hear in Jesus' story that you might feel really hopeless at the moment, but Jesus is saying that hopeless feeling, it feels like hell, but it's actually the doorway to true hope.

This story gives you a picture of God of the way back to true life. But it's not in the way that most people try and reinvent themselves, and this story shows us that.

This son does what many try to do. He comes up with a plan to redeem himself. He knows he can't undo the past. He can't. He's done too much damage to the relationship.

[7 : 10] But he comes up with a plan, at least let me make it up to you a bit. I know I can't be in the family, but let me work for you. Let me pay something back. So he turns around and he goes home.

And I think when we try, when we experience hard times in life, when we hit rock bottom, I think a lot of people try and turn to religion, thinking that if I come back to God, if I come back to church, if I give something back, if I give a bit of money, if I turn up a little bit, if I volunteer a little bit, then I can reinvent myself.

If I give something back to God, he might help me turn my life around. Now again, this story, Jesus wants your life to be turned around, but not in the way you might expect.

This father won't hear anything of your self-made plan to redeem yourself. He'll have none of it. We hear in the story, while the son's still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Now fathers back then, they did not run. Women ran. Children ran. So this guy, his emotions are just letting loose. His son's back. He doesn't care what people think of him.

[8 : 48] He doesn't hit or scold the son. How dare you show your face? He embraces him. He doesn't rub his son's nose in what he's done, like keeping him in guilt, going, you better make it up to me.

He doesn't do that. He kisses him. The son tries to implement his plan. I've sinned against heaven and against you, but he can't even get the words out.

This father will have none of it. He won't even let him take a bath. This son has no opportunity to clean up his act.

This father gets the coat, puts it on him. The father brings him back, puts a ring on his finger. He's part of the family. You can't earn your way back.

This father will bring you back at his own cost. Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him. Ring on his hand, shoes on his feet. And this father wants to celebrate because he's got his son back.

[9 : 53] This son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Do you know God like this kind of father? You might be here today, like I've said, trying to have a fresh start for yourself, thinking that getting into religion might start improving things.

But this father, God the father, he won't let you clean up your act and prove yourself. He will come to you. At his own cost, he will bring you back.

He wants to embrace and kiss and bring you back into the family. And we know this for sure because the one telling this story is on the road to Jerusalem.

He's on a road where he knows at the end of it is a cross. And he's telling this story. This father will bring you back at his cost and he paid that cost on the cross.

It's not your plan of redemption that works. It's his plan of redemption. It's his cost. He wants to bring you back. So can I urge you to leave whatever plan you've got to clean up your act at the cross and just look to him.

[11 : 27] Let him clean you. Let him clothe you. Let him make you God's child again. You might feel a very long way from God. But the moment he sees a desire to come back, he will come to you.

He will meet you where you're at right now. So can I urge you, turn back to this kind of father.

Do it in your mind now. Do it in the car on the way home. But I suggest you get ready to pull over because the tears are going to flow. Be careful about that. But do it.

This father just wants you back. That's the kind of God he is. And he wants to celebrate when you come back. So that's part one of the story.

We've got part two coming. But I want to pause there. And we're going to sing another song. And then we're going to hear from Don McMurray who's going to tell us a bit of his story of how he was brought to this father.

[12 : 37] And he asked me to say he's truncated the story down. And then James will bring us part two of the story and I'll say a few more words.

So let's sing and then we'll hear from Don and then we'll hear the next part. If anyone's looking for pride and prejudice, I've got the DVD at home.

Of course, the first thing that God hates out of six things is pride. And I think pride was the downfall of my life in part of it at any rate.

But at the age of zero, being born, like the newborn baby just heard about, they called me Donald. Donald meets proud chief.

And pride is always there with me as a bit of an extrovert and a show off in so many ways. But I can't remember never being at church unless I was sick or something else was drastically wrong from the age of two, riding on my father's shoulders, coming from the Presbyterian church at Bangalore.

[13 : 48] And even as we moved to Newcastle in 1938, my father was an elder in the Presbyterian church at St Andrews, superintendent of the Sunday school.

And I was always there at church. By the time I was 14, I was in year nine and knocked around with a bit of a mob around the Cooksville area, stealing, lying, cheating, and filthy and thought and word and deed.

And I was so bad at school, I neglected everything then and failed every subject and they put me back to year eight from year nine. I shamed my father and my mother and people that looked to me and thought I was a lovely little boy, they didn't know my heart.

I brushed up my act, left the mob and did well at school the following year and I thought I'd be a teacher, went on to year 10, but mucked up a bit at school and decided I'd leave school again and earn some money like my mates.

My third job was in a bank, a union bank in Hunter Street and at 18 they wanted to send me to the country and no way was I going to go because I just started playing state under 21 hockey and hockey became my god.

[15 : 22] Sport was the thing that I lived for really, although I was everything at church. At 18 also I joined the Freemasons with my father and two brothers.

To be a Freemason you had to be good enough and so I felt pretty good about that and everyone blackballed me and I thought, well, I'm doing pretty good.

By the time I was 20 I'd been selected in a under 21 Australian hockey team on paper. It was all amateurish then and we never went anywhere but here I was, I thought, boy, this is good, I'm heading for the 56 Olympics and then after church one Sunday I went to, down to the park just nearest it at Cooks Hill and the boys were playing a game of hockey.

There was no Sunday sport but they organised a social game and they said, come on, we want you to play. I said, oh, no, I promised the Lord I wouldn't play any Sunday sport and so they badgered me and not being a true believer I soon got my gear on and said, something's going to happen and sure enough towards the end of the game I was flat on my back my nose splattered across my face and that was the end of my Olympic dreams.

By 21 I was engaged to a teacher by 22 I was disengaged and then I started to go with my wife who was in the choir with me, June my later wife-to-be and we were married and we moved to the house that I now live in at Charlestown.

[17 : 08] After we'd had two children still going into town we had no car for seven years still going into town to St Andrew's Preparation Church pushing a stroller up towards Charlestown Road there was no footpaths in those days and we just got a bit sick of it and we thought well, let's go to the local church so we went to Charlestown Presbyterian.

Now the Presbyterian Church in those days was all liberal in other words that they preached they didn't preach the gospel that we're hearing today they preached about a moralistic type of life a good life and we had a wonderful time amongst the people but we went up to Charlestown Presbyterian Church just a kilometre up the road and it was there that we met Bruce and Olive Boots they were later the ones that started Courant Books but Bruce and Olive Boots are in this church a liberal church and they were true believers they'd been converted in the New England area and they saw that we were quite religious people through the Freemasonry I'd now come to the point where I'd become Master of the Masonic Lodge at Lord Robert's Temperance and I was feeling pretty proud about that that I'd reached to this height in Freemasonry but Bruce and Olive could see that we were very religious but not Christians

I was then elected to the eldership of St. David's Presbyterian Church at Charlestown unconverted with a number of other people unconverted very few Christians in the whole church and I must say that we I'd had a few tragedies in the house in the home my father died nine months before we were married I had a brother who died in Morristet Mental Hospital on a criminal charge he was 44 left six children I had another my oldest brother was dying of lung cancer and in the January of 1961 I I was just I went to visit him I could hear the death rattles in his throat and I just couldn't stand it any longer I was caring for my mother trying to provide for my wife and two children and with all these deaths and things going on

I just couldn't cope and I just wanted to commit suicide I spoke to my wife and to my cousin and we went I went to see Dr Chambers at near the police station up in Newcastle and told him my story and he said well how are you with God I thought this man's a bit of a nut I've always been at church who could be more better than I am I'm always there everything at church I go out talking to people about God and at any rate that night in bed I hadn't slept well and conviction came over me that I wanted to be like my father an elder I was but had no peace with God I'd risen to the height of a sonic lodge in the first three degrees but I had no peace with God I thought well

I was pretty good going to church all the time but then the Lord just showed me that the church didn't die for my sins showed me that my sin was against the holy God I'd done plenty of things wrong but I was better than most people but when he showed me that my sin was against the holy God and that Christ came into the world to save sinners not good people that I went out in the lounge room during the sleep in the bed and I just clonked down in front of the chair that I now sit in and I just called on the Lord that he might save me first the scripture came to mind which I can't remember ever reading but it did no temptation has taken you except such as is common to man but God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you're able but with the temptation will also make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it

[21 : 52] I didn't want to bear it I wanted to be zapped out of my problem but the boots kept pointing me to Christ and I believe the Lord changed me on that that evening and gave me a hope that God is faithful I started to read my dad's old Bible and Lord was speaking to me I was in depression for about three years before I left the Freemasonry and then there was this peace that I had that God is good pride is awful self-righteousness God hates but Lord he loves sinners who come to him with nothing but a hope that he might save them now his oldest son was in the field and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing and he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant and he said to him your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound but he was angry and refused to go in his father came out and entreated him but he answered his father look these many years

I have served you and I never have disobeyed your command yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends but when this son of yours came who has devoured your property with prostitutes you killed the fattened calf for him and he said to him son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours it was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this your brother was dead and is alive he was lost and is found well like Don I'm assuming that many here today have grown up in and around church circles as I have and if that's you it's the story of the elder brother that really challenges your view of God and your view of sin and your view of why Jesus came to save us so as we picture this elder brother dirty and tired working in the field and he hears music and dancing and what is that what's going on and he finds out and he is he is livid like he is furious now who's he angry at he's mainly angry at his dad and he shows his anger at his father by publicly humiliating him by not going into the greatest party his dad has ever thrown it's like at a wedding where everyone's celebrating inside and there's a family argument happening outside he's standing outside and he lets he just gives full vent to his anger he doesn't respect him calling him father he goes look these many years

I've served you and I never disobeyed your command yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends but when this son of yours came who has devoured your property with prostitutes you killed the fattened calf for him why is he angry and not relieved and full of joy like his dad I think notice that he's upset about the fattened calf you gave the calf to him I deserve your stuff not him you haven't even given me a goat now I know that calf and goat probably isn't relating too well to us you gave the family car to him you kidding after years of obeying you surely I deserve some reward for my efforts surely this gathering if we're going to celebrate anyone it should be celebrating me for my obedience not this self indulgent son of yours can you understand his anger

I can I think I know it too well I think I know when I'm thinking like this when things don't go well in life and I feel like God has short changed me I'm one of the good ones like I try my best with my family I sacrifice the church I did the prayers you haven't given me the health for me and my family you haven't helped helped me given me that peaceful holiday you just feel angry that you're not getting what you deserve and I got to admit I struggled to get my head around the father's response and I think I struggled because if I'm like anyone I think I can relate more to the elder brother here's what the father said son probably more tender than that son you are always with me as compared to the other you are always with me and all that is mine is yours now how does that answer the claim of unfairness you're always with me and all that is mine is yours how does that answer the claim of unfairness because he hasn't been rewarded for his obedience

I think to understand that we need to put ourselves in the father's shoes and we need to feel the heartbreak that the father felt he's hearing his son basically say I was doing all this I was obeying you to get the calf to get the goat you mean all these years you obeyed me to get the stuff all I own is yours we're family I thought you were obeying me because you love me here I thought relationship is the reward I thought you were obeying me because you wanted to express your love for me you love being my son but you too just want the stuff and not me both sons saw their father in terms of rules the younger son didn't want anything to do with the rules they thought no way

[28 : 44] I'm getting out of here I'm going to find life away from God's rules whereas the older son was thinking in terms of rules as well okay I don't like the rule I'll do it they both were thinking in terms of rules when the father wanted relationship they both wanted the stuff and not the father himself and I think this is why there can be so much religious activity going on and we heard a glimpse to that without without real love for God we don't fully appreciate why Jesus had to die on the cross until we understand that I we need to be saved for the motivations for doing right we need to be saved for the wrong things we do but we also need to be saved for the motivations for why we do the right thing because if we do the right thing to try and control

God if I do this for you you owe me or if we do the right things to bolster our sense of self importance we compare ourselves to others they're failing I'm succeeding then it's not true love for God it's the elder brother's self righteous goodness that makes him lost he is just as lost as the younger brother it just looks different he is worlds away from loving the father for his sake we can know we are lost like this I think we can feel it and sense it when we are comparing ourselves to others we hear this older brother go this son of yours he wants nothing to do with him he's comparing himself and I think we can do the same when we don't want others to be forgiven because we think we don't need forgiveness ourselves a true son wouldn't be comparing like that a true son would share this father's longing to have all the family come home so this story

Jesus is telling is a confronting story it's bad people good people you're all lost we're all lost because we're all looking at God as if it's all about rules trying to run away from rules or trying to keep the rules to get his stuff we're all lost when this father wants relationship as the reward all year round but especially at Easter we celebrate that we have a true elder brother this elder brother could have left the home and searched for the younger brother and brought him home but he didn't but we have a true one we have one who left heaven to come and find us he left his home in heaven there is one son who always saw his father as he really is and who obeyed him out of love not to get his stuff but willing to lose it all even to the point of death there was one time he didn't call god father and it was on the cross my god my god why have you forsaken me he was cut out of the family so that you and

I can be brought in with his resurrection we can now enjoy a relationship with this father as close as Jesus has a relationship with God the father and we can celebrate that forgiveness is done reconciliation is done so Jesus gives us a picture of what God is really like he runs out to us he comes out to us to plead to come in and there's only one question that remains it's the cliff hanger of Jesus story will the elder brother come in he's outside in the dark angry feeling entitled he won't come into the celebration because he doesn't think he needs forgiveness will he come in we don't find out and it's the cliff hanger of my story your story will you come in or will you stand outside and be in the dark because you think you're too good will you come in and celebrate forgiveness and see this father as wanting relationship not rules yes obedience but obedience because you love the father not to get stuff from him so

I'll leave it with you will you come in to the party that has started the resurrection means the party has begun peace with God as Don talked about has been achieved it's time to celebrate and I think the moment we're in right now is kind of like at a wedding reception when the party has begun but we're waiting for the groom the bridal party to show up it's going to kick up a notch when he comes back but right now we can start to celebrate because we have peace with God so will you come in and celebrate his forgiveness and beg for them