

When God's generosity is rejected

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is taken from Luke 15 and we're starting at verse 11 to 32.

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 off 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 his 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 perish here with hunger. 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. Now his older 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 signed. 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've never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

[2 : 16] 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, morning, everyone. Lovely to have you with us this morning. Let me pray as we look at Luke chapter 15 together. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the creator of the world, that you're the sustainer and keep it going. And thank you for the great privilege we have this morning of hearing your words, the words of the creator and sustainer. And please, therefore, help us to be attentive.

We pray that you'd help us to believe what we hear and to put it into practice. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, everyone loves a good story, whether it's a book to curl up with or a film to get lost in. And Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, which we're going to be looking at over the next three Sundays, is surely one of the best. It's both familiar and heartwarming. It's about God's warm welcome for those who are far from him and come back. It's a glorious picture of restoration and salvation.

And yet, as I said last week, it is also deeply subversive. As Jesus challenges what nearly everyone has ever thought about God, about humanity, about people, about the kinds of people God welcomes, and the kinds of people who he turns away. In summary, it is a parable about repentance.

[4 : 13] Last week, remember, we saw, didn't we, what it is that brings God joy. The answer, when lost sinners repent and come back to him. Like the shepherd rejoicing over finding a lost sheep.

Have a look back to verse 7, if you've brought a Bible with you. Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

And like the woman rejoicing when she finds her lost coin. Verse 10, just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

And yet, the fact is that repentance has practically dropped out of our Christian vocabulary. We talk, don't we, about having faith, or following Jesus, or trusting in Jesus, or being a disciple of Jesus. Now, they are all good Bible ways that describe what it means to be a Christian. But what about repentance? When was the last time you heard a Christian leader, perhaps being interviewed publicly on TV or the radio, and speak of repentance?

[5 : 30] In the current debates in the Church of England on human sexuality, there's much talk of giving people a warm welcome, of being inclusive. And yet, we hardly ever hear the call to repentance.

And yet, at the end of Luke's Gospel, Jesus' summary of the Gospel that is to be proclaimed to the nations across the world is not just the forgiveness of sins, but of repentance.

You'll see I put Luke 24, verses 46 to 47 on the outline, the words of the risen Jesus. Thus, it is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

In other words, it's vital that we grasp what Jesus teaches about repentance, if we're to be faithful in proclaiming the Gospel. And therefore, this week, we're going to think together about the kind of repentant sinners that Jesus, that God welcomes.

Next week, we're going to think about what repentance looks like, and the warm welcome that repentant sinners receive. And then the following week, the third week, we're going to be thinking about the kind of sinners who won't repent, and who aren't welcomed.

[6 : 59] And today, in order to understand the kind of repentant sinners that God does welcome, we need to have a deep grasp of sin. Hence, our two headings.

Firstly, we're going to think about the heart of sin, and secondly, the consequences of sin. I don't know if they're not on the screen, but firstly, the heart of sin.

Secondly, the consequences of sin. Firstly, then, the heart of sin, and have a look at Luke 15, verses 11 to 13. Jesus said, There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of the 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.

Father, give me my share of the property. It is an outrageous request. The younger son, he wants his inheritance now.

[8 : 08] And just like with any inheritance, that is tantamount to wishing his father were dead. He wants the freedom to live life on his own terms.

He wants the gifts the father gives him, but without the giver. It is not simply rejecting the father. It is rebellion against the father.

I'll be in charge of my life, my destiny. I'll decide what is right and what is wrong. Now, that is the Bible's diagnosis of each one of us.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah says, all we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. Indeed, it's the very attitude of rebellion against God that we see right at the beginning of the Bible in the Garden of Eden.

As the serpent says to the woman, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden? The temptation to believe that God's a killjoy, that he's a spoilsport.

[9 : 14] The serpent then says to the woman, as he encourages her to do the one thing that is forbidden, you shall surely not die. The temptation to believe there won't be any consequences.

And finally, the serpent says, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil. The temptation to believe that they'll be like God.

You'll be grown up. You'll be free. You'll be able to live just how you want. Well, it's just what the younger son does, isn't it, here in the parable that Jesus tells.

God's a spoilsport. There won't be any consequences. I'll be free. And so he puts as much distance between himself and the father as possible.

He leaves the land of Israel, the land of God's promise, the place of God's blessing for a far and distant country. In other words, he hasn't just rejected his father, he's rejected God as well.

[10:21] He's not only far away geographically, he's also turned his back on the cultural and spiritual values that have shaped his life. Now, it is, of course, what each one of us is by nature like.

There was an interview on the radio a few weeks ago, just before Christmas, with Arsene Wenger, the former manager of Arsenal for 22 years. And he was being asked about his upbringing in eastern France, how he was brought up in a religious family, how he went to mass every day, and confession every week.

And this is what he said of his religious upbringing. He said, you're never happy. You never do well enough. In other words, he was brought up with a distorted view of God, a view of God as being a harsh taskmaster, a killjoy.

Perhaps some of us were brought up in a similar way. And as a result, he went on to explain how one of his favourite songs as a teenager in the 1960s was John Lennon's song, Imagine.

Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try, no hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today.

[11:43] A song that proclaims how wonderful, how liberating it would be if there was indeed no heaven, no hell, and no God. But the fact is, you don't have to have been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church like Arsene Wenger to have a distorted view of God.

We all do. Because it's at the very heart of what the Bible calls sin. God's a small sport. I'll run my life my own way.

I'll be free. Just think for a moment. You see, how do we explain what is wrong with our worlds? Of course, the naive optimist says, well, we're on a kind of upward evolutionary trajectory.

That if only you sort out the, I don't know, the education system or the environment or get the right governments, then things can only get better. But the realist knows that is a pipe dream.

And Jesus says, the problem lies with the human heart. Indeed, for many people throughout history, it's been Jesus' diagnosis of the human heart of sin that has persuaded them that he is not simply a teacher, but actually that he is God himself.

[13:07] Because he alone understands the true nature of humanity, the heart of sin. Secondly, the parable shows us the consequences of sin.

Have a look at verses 13 to 16. From verse 13, 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 and 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 his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate.

And no one gave him anything. Now, perhaps even more startling than these sons' request is the father's response. He lets him go.

[14:11] It's just what God does with us. He lets us go. He gives us over to the consequences of our sin. He gives us the freedom that we crave. Indeed, it's just what the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 1.

I put the verses there on the outline so you can look them up later on. It's very striking what Paul says in Romans 1. He says there will be a judgment on the final day.

And in our consciences, we all know that. But today, in the present, we see God's judgment in that he gives us over to the consequences of our sin.

Just like the father does with the younger son in the parable. You want to see where your sin, your rejection of God, takes you? Go ahead. God removes his restraint upon us.

Well, at first, the son has a ball. As he does all the things he's been longing to do, he is free. And yet, it's not long before the excitement wears thin, his pockets wear out, and his friends desert him.

[15:26] As someone has said, money speaks. All it ever says is, goodbye. It is a picture of decreation, of isolation.

The one who once sat at his father's table now doesn't even share a table with the pigs. He's exchanged the freedom which he so longed for more of for the slavery of being a hired laborer, barely on the minimum wage.

He's discovered that sin is a hard taskmaster. Notice he's in physical poverty, having spent all he has. He's in relational poverty, he's been deserted by everyone, and above all, spiritual poverty, far

from God.

Jake was telling us at the prayer gathering on Tuesday evening that in March, Roger Carswell will be with us again for a series of Real Lives events. One of the people he'll be interviewing is Yvonne Edwards, who I had the privilege of interviewing up in the city last year.

She had what many people would regard as a dream lifestyle, a good job that paid well, a caring household, a caring husband, a lovely home, a terrific social life.

[16:46] She was the life and soul of every party. And yet, she became an alcoholic. That became the abuse of drugs, and she got herself to the stage where she couldn't even care for her own children.

Eventually, she ended up in rehab in a private hospital. Now, it's clearly not the case that sin does that to everyone in such a dramatic way. It does to some, and in God's kindness, it's the thing that he uses to bring people back to himself so often.

But others don't end up like that. There are plenty of people who say, I don't have your faith, life's going just fine. In fact, I don't see any need for God. And yet, they are sinners just as much as everyone else.

You see, what is the Lord Jesus doing in this parable? He's showing us the vital distinction between sin and sins with an S at the end.

Sin, what we saw in our first point, I want to live my life my way without God, that's the heart attitude. Sins with an S at the end, that's the consequences.

[18:04] It's sin worked out in our lives. I guess it's one of the things, isn't it, we've learned about COVID after the last few months or so.

How the symptoms can vary enormously from person to person. Yes, you may experience a persistent cough, a high temperature, a loss of taste and so on. Or you may simply feel a bit rough for a couple of days or indeed experience no symptoms whatsoever.

In other words, COVID looks different in different people. But whether the symptoms are obvious or not, it is still COVID. And it's just the same with sin.

We are all sinners. That is the underlying spiritual condition of each one of us. And yet the symptoms, the sins, look different in different people.

After all, remember who it is that Jesus is telling this parable to. Just look back to the beginning of Luke chapter 15 verses 1 and 2.

[19:12] Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

The Pharisees, the religious establishment, they divided people into these two groups. They were the sinners, those who were clearly bad, who were clearly far from God and everyone knew they were far from God.

And there were the others like themselves who, well, were respectable, outwardly speaking. And they appeared to be right with God.

Now, of course, the fact is you can only maintain that distinction if you focus on sins rather than the heart attitude of sin. Because if you are a respectable person, then your sins will be respectable sins, much less visible.

Things like pride, selfishness, anxiety, envy, impatience, discontentment, judgmentalism, ingratitude, jealousy, lack of self-control. And you'll be able to look down on others, those whose sins are less respectable, those whose sins are more obvious, and by comparison think well of yourself.

[20:33] Now, that is a very dangerous place to be. It's where the Pharisees were. And sadly, it is where many in Dulwich are as well.

Blind to the fact that although they are respectable, and although they are respected, they are sinners just the same as we all are. Their heart attitude to God is no different.

Well, as we finish, let's think this through a little bit more, and I've got two implications for us. First implication, think again about who Jesus welcomes.

Think again about who Jesus welcomes. Here's a question. From this parable, from Luke chapter 15, who are the sorts of sinners Jesus welcomes when they repent?

I wonder how you'd answer that question. Well, surely the answer is this. Jesus welcomes the very worst. isn't that wonderfully encouraging?

[21 : 46] Wonderfully reassuring? I'm sure I'm not the anyone in this room who, like the Apostle Paul, I've looked inside my own heart, and I've thought to myself, surely I am the very worst of sinners.

Yvonne Edwards, who I mentioned earlier, describes how once she was in rehab, she had read through all the lifestyle magazines that were there in her room, and the only thing that was left to read was the Bible that had been left on her bedside table.

So she picked it up, and it fell open at Luke chapter 7, and the woman who we're told was a sinner, who was so overwhelmed by the fact that Jesus had forgiven her sins, that she anoints his feet with a jar of expensive ointments.

And Jesus explains to the onlookers, for their benefit and for her benefit, therefore I tell you her sins which are many are forgiven. Your faith has saved you, go in peace.

And as her Bible fell open at this story, as she read it to herself, she said to herself, I am this woman, and she put her trust in the Lord Jesus.

[22 : 59] Jesus welcomes the very worst of sinners who repents. He welcomes anyone who repents. God will have you.

But there's no good news in that, is there? No good news at all. Indeed, if that is your view of the Christian faith, then please will you see how very wrong indeed you are.

Now, if this son in Luke 15 can repent, if he can be welcomed back by God, then anyone can be. And that may just be the very thing you need to hear this morning.

And as a church, let's not forget the heart of God, who longs that even the worst of sinners might repent. I've recently heard interviews of a high-flying city executive and how she repented, a man who done significant time in prison and how he repented, a student who was describing how he hated God and hated Christians and yet he repented.

it. Let's cast our net far and wide as we proclaim the gospel, as we seek to invite people to the women's lunch coming up in ten days time, as we seek in March to invite people to those real-lives events, even inviting the worst of sinners, those who are the most hostile, those whose lifestyles perhaps we find the most challenging and difficult.

[24 : 46] So that's the first implication. think about who Jesus welcomes. Second implication, think again about finding freedom.

Think again about finding freedom. And here's the question with this one. Is freedom a good thing? Our culture of course says yes and unreservedly so.

There's an article this month in the SE22 magazine which gets delivered for free to all the houses in East Dulwich. It's an article about well-being and it starts, autonomy is a crucial part of well-being. Feeling like you're in control of your life, at least some of the time, is massively important for our physical, our spiritual, our emotional and our mental health.

freedom to live as he wants to live is the one thing the prodigal son does not need.

[25 : 54] It's why so many experience a midlife crisis because freedom to live how I want to live simply hasn't delivered. it. And the tragedy is that the solution for so many people in the midst of their midlife crisis is more freedom to do what they want.

So then where is true freedom found? Well our world says it's by looking within yourself, by discovering who you truly are.

and if you can change yourself, your name or your status or your job or even your gender, then you can free yourself to be the person you want to be.

What does Jesus say? You don't find freedom by looking within because if that's all you're going to do, if that's all you do, you're not going to like what you find.

And if you pursue your dreams, they won't deliver. Instead, you find true freedom by turning to Jesus and coming back to God.

[27 : 04] In other words, the world's vision of human flourishing is very, very different from the Christian vision of human flourishing.

They could not be more different. Let me lead us in prayer. Let's pray together. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much indeed for the way in which you graciously expose our hearts, the heart of sin, the consequences of sin. And yet we praise you that in your great kindness, you welcome back to yourself the very worst of sinners who repents.

Amen.