

when God's generosity is assumed

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[0 : 0 0] 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. 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.

Morning, everyone. Lovely to see you. Please do keep Luke chapter 15 open and let's pray together. Let's pray. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, the Bible. And we pray that as we look at it together now, please would it indeed be for us a lamp to our feet and a light to our path to help us to see the way in which we should go.

[3 : 0 9] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is the final talk in our series of four talks, God's heart and ours, where we've seen God's joyful compassion towards the lost, towards those who are far from him. The parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. But here's the question. Why doesn't the parable of the prodigal son finish at verse 24? For this, my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

And they began to celebrate. After all, that's the point, isn't it? At which the first two parables do finish. So the lost sheep is found, the lost coin is found, and there's a party.

It's the equivalent of watching a film where everything works out in the end. They all lived happily ever after. God welcomes back the prodigal son. And perhaps it's hard not to shed a tear or two as we consider God's welcome and the welcome that he has given to us, those of us who are trusting in the Lord Jesus and the amazingly warm, open-armed welcome that he gives to anyone who repents and puts their trust in Jesus, God's heart for lost sinners. And yet, it's not where the third parable, the parable of the prodigal son, finishes. Instead, there's this dramatic change of tone as the focus switches in verses 25 to 32 that we're looking at today to the older brother.

And it is profoundly subversive. The equivalent, perhaps, of watching a film that is so deeply disturbing that you almost feel that you've kind of been winded. It's so completely not what you would expect. Because it's not a parable about one son, but two sons. And the punchline focuses on the second.

And Jesus is wanting us to compare the two in order to rethink, firstly, what we mean when we talk about sin, and secondly, what we mean when we talk about salvation. And if you've got an outline in front of you, then you'll see we're going to look at each of those two in turn. Firstly, rethinking sin. Or to use the language of our passage, rethinking lostness, what it looks like to be far from God. Because at one level, yes, of course, these two sons, they look very different, don't they? I mean, just see how the older son describes himself in verse 29.

[5 : 59] These many years I've served you, and I never disobeyed your commands. And look by contrast, so he is the loyal, outwardly honest, hard-working son.

Look by contrast at the way in which he describes his younger brother, verse 30. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

Well, he's not far off the mark, is he? In the way in which he describes his younger brother. Remember his request back in verse 12, as Andy reminded me, reminded us just now, for his share of the inheritance.

And then how in verse 13, he puts as much distance between himself and his father as possible, physically, relationally, and above all spiritually, as he squanders and wastes the money until he has nothing left.

And yet, at another level, dig a bit deeper, and the two are really very similar in their attitude towards their father.

[7 : 10] Let's go back to verses 25 to 28, and the older son's response to the welcome his brother has received. 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's received him back safe and sound.

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. Do you see how he's snubbing his father?

It's a very public, isn't it, vote of no confidence in him. And then as we read on in verse 29, it's just as, it's clear that he is just as ungrateful to his father as the younger brother.

Verse 29, he answered his father, look, these many years I've served you, and I never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

[8 : 12] But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. I wonder if you can hear the tone in which those things are said.

In other words, you can think of this in terms of relationship. His relationship with his father is just as distant as the younger sons, as he's far away in the faraway country.

Or you can think of it in terms of control. It's obviously what the younger son wanted, to be able to make his own decisions, to be completely free to do what he wants to do with his life and with the money and inheritance.

And so he puts distance with his father and rejects him as publicly as he can. And yet it's equally clear that the older brother wants the same thing.

Did you see that telling phrase in verse 29? These many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your commands. Can you hear what his unspoken demand is?

[9 : 19] I've never disobeyed you. Now you have to do things in my life the way I want them to be done.

Isn't that what he's saying? So, both sons reject the authority of the father. One does it by being very bad.

The other does it by being very good. Both of them alienated from the father's heart. Both of them equally lost.

Lost. Tim Keller in his book on this parable, *Prodigal God*, he quotes Flannery O'Connor's novel, *Wise Blood*, and the description of one of the characters, Hazel Motes, who is described like this.

There was a deep, black, wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.

[10 : 20] That is a very profound insight into what so many people do. They try to avoid Jesus by being good.

And of course, then you have rights. God owes you. He owes you answer prayers. He owes you a good life. He owes you a ticket to heaven when you die. And you certainly don't need a savior.

You don't need a savior who's died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins because you are your own savior. In other words, we need to rethink sin.

You can be a rebellious younger son or a good older son. Both of them are ways of keeping God at arm's length.

Their sins, with an S at the end, are very different. Their sin is identical. I wonder which of those two you are most naturally like.

[11 : 22] Because all of us are by nature like one of them, either in our badness or in our goodness. A few years ago, I served as chaplain for a year to one of the city livery companies.

And I remember one occasion when I was sitting at their annual dinner next to one of the senior members of the company. He had had a long, distinguished career. He was utterly charming and delightful.

He was very happy to have a conversation with me about the church and religion and Christianity generally. Presumably, he assumed that was the only thing I was capable of talking about. And yet, as soon as it got personal, as soon as the conversation turned to where he personally stood with Jesus, he did a complete 180-degree U-turn and started talking to the person on the other side.

Well, I guess it's fair to say, isn't it, that Dulwich is full of respectable, hard-working older brothers like this, not to mention their equivalent older sisters.

If that's you, I hope you can see what Jesus is saying. You need to take a long, hard look in the mirror because it is older brothers that Jesus is aiming this parable at.

[12 : 47] Just flick back to chapter 15, verses 1 and 2, where the chapter begins. 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. It's just what the older brother is saying, isn't it? You're receiving the sinner of a younger brother and you're eating with him.

You're having a party for him. It's so often the way that respectable people respond to the gospel. As I guess many of us will know all too well, perhaps respectable friends or neighbors or colleagues or respectable family members who have heard the gospel.

But the very thing that stops them coming back to God and putting their trust in Jesus is their very respectability and their goodness.

So that's our first point this morning. Rethinking sin or lostness. Well, what are the implications of that before we move on?

[13 : 58] Well, briefly, three implications. Firstly, some of us will need to rethink ourselves. You are good. You are decent. You are upright.

And that is the very reason that you've never repented. You've never put your trust in Jesus and come back to God. You may even regard Christians who talk about trusting in Jesus or being a disciple of Jesus.

You may even regard them as taking Christianity too seriously or even being rather extreme. You are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone. But that is only because you fail to realize how very far away from God you are yourself.

Just listen to one writer. There are countless people like that today. respectable, conventional, good people.

They look down their noses at the permissive society. They curl their lips up at the decay in moral standards. They think they are good, but they're not. They're simply dull.

[15 : 03] They think they're being immoral, but they're not. They're merely feeling sanctimonious. They think they are Christians, but they're not. They're Pharisees. Jesus would have us know how huge the difference is.

That then leads to the second implication, which is for the younger brothers amongst us. It's very natural for younger brothers to think that older brotherliness and Christianity are the same thing.

Again, Jesus wants us to know they are not. Perhaps you're looking on the Christian faith and you look at older brother types and you say to yourself, well, frankly, if that's Christianity, then that's the very last thing I won't have anything to do with.

That's part of the problem with society. It's not part of the solution. And Jesus couldn't agree with you more. In fact, he's encouraging you to see that right, real Christianity is something very different from religion and something very different from what you've imagined it to be.

Third implication, we need to think what it means to be needy. Many churches do a wonderful job serving the physically needy.

[16 : 27] homeless shelters, food banks, those for whom life is a mess. In other words, younger brothers. And yet older brothers are just as needy.

They're respectable, the decent, the good neighbor, the good friends. They are just as needy because they are just as far away from God.

And yet because life seems to be fine for them, they are blind to their plight. And they don't have obvious needs. And so they can be blind, we can be blind to their plight as well.

In other words, in a place like Dulwich, we are surrounded by very, very needy people who are far from God. So that's our first point this morning, rethinking sin.

Secondly, rethinking salvation. Because what's the big shock of this parable? It is surely that this outwardly bad younger son, he's at the party.

[17 : 31] It's held in his honor. Remember verses 23 and 24. As the father says, And bring the fattened calf and kill it. And let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. And yet the surprise is that the outwardly good older brother refuses to enter.

Despite the father, verse 28, going out to entreat him to come in. Yet he refuses to do so. It seems to me that we all intrinsically have what we might call a sort of tower block view of salvation.

Who gets to heaven and who doesn't. And we put good people at the very top of the tower block. And then as you go down floor by floor, you have less good people. And then eventually you get the worst people.

And then finally the very worst people at ground floor level. And at some point as you go down floor by floor, we'd all of us draw a horizontal line cutting the tower block in half like that.

[18 : 39] Such that those who are above the line go to heaven. Those who are below the line don't. And while of course none of us would want to put ourselves at the very top. We're far too, I guess, self-aware to do that.

Nonetheless, we'd all want to put ourselves at some stage. Perhaps just above the line to make sure that we all sneak in somehow. Well, what is this parable?

The parable of the two prodigal sons. Because of course that is what they both are. What does this parable do to our tower block? It demolishes it. Completely.

Totally. Both sons are welcome at the party. And yet it's the good, the hard-working older son who refuses to go in.

While the younger one is welcomed. If we weren't so familiar with the parable, it would be truly shocking. Now those of us who were at our church away day two years ago, you may remember Richard Hagen speaking.

[19 : 46] And telling us something about Henry Gorecki, who was the American army chaplain, who served as chaplain to the Nazi prisoners of war during the Nuremberg trials.

He's been described as the minister to monsters. And yet Richard showed us how in his biography, actually a number of those men came to put their trust in Jesus, despite the fact that they had committed the most terrible crimes.

Amongst them Fritz Salkel, once head of labor supply. He was, according to the chief justice at the Nuremberg trials, the greatest and cruelest slaver since the pharaohs of Egypt.

Another was Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the Supreme Army, command in charge of the armed forces. And his unquestioning allegiance to Hitler, it has been claimed, probably led to more deaths than anyone else.

And yet Gorecki records the moment when on his knees and under deep distress, he received the body and blood of our Savior in the bread and the wine. With tears in his eyes, he said, may Christ my Savior stand by me all the way.

[21 : 04] Now I wonder how those brief testimonies make us feel. Yes, at one level, it's wonderful. But isn't there also something about such wicked, dreadful men putting their trust in Jesus, being forgiven their sins, isn't there just something about that that sticks in the throat?

Just as it does with the older son, as he says, but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

Just as it does with the Pharisees at the beginning of the chapter. In other words, it takes us back to the whole, to the beginning of this section of Luke's Gospel and the question that it started with.

Do you remember chapter 13, verse 23 and 24? Do you remember the question that Jesus was asked in chapter 13, verse 23? Lord, will those who are saved be few? And he answers, strive to enter through the narrow door.

For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. And he finishes in verse 30. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

[22 : 26] Just as he says in chapter 14, verse 11, But everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Just as in the parable of the two sons. The older son, he's very much the first, and yet he won't humble himself.

He becomes amongst the last. While the younger son, very much the last, humbles himself, and so is amongst the first.

We need to rethink salvation. So let's go back to our tower block. The line isn't horizontal, whereby those above go to heaven, and those below don't.

Rather, I hope we can see the line actually is a vertical line, cutting the tower block completely in two, from top all the way down to the bottom. Because whether you are good or bad, is not the issue.

[23 : 34] The issue is, whether we have repented, and turned to Jesus, and put our trust in him, for the forgiveness of sins. It's in those that God rejoices.

Verse 32. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.

So I wonder if we have a kind of misplaced idea of judgment. I wonder if you're someone and you think of judgment as God sort of sorting out the human race into those he likes, who he sends to heaven, and those he doesn't like, and he sends them to hell.

But that's not the picture, is it, that Jesus gives in this story. Instead, he portrays God as overflowing with grace and generosity and kindness, opening his arms to all, older brother, younger brother, saint or sinner, without any distinction.

Which means, that if we stay out of heaven, it's because we refuse to go in. It's actually because we're too proud to admit our sin, and repent, and accept his forgiveness.

[25 : 01] I started this talk, this series of talks, by saying how profoundly subversive this parable is.

It profoundly challenges the way in which we naturally think. Jesus is saying there are two things that can keep you out of heaven, your badness or your goodness.

Now just have a think about those two. Which do you think is the more dangerous? I assume it's far more dangerous to be good and respectable.

To be like the older brother who thinks he doesn't need to repent and doesn't need to ask for forgiveness. I presume that's why the punchline of this parable is as it is.

Older brothers don't think they need to turn to God because they see little that they've done wrong or at least nothing they can't sort out for themselves. And tragically, they never experience the father's kiss and the father's warm welcome.

[26 : 18] Well, what are the implications? Well, firstly, repent. Jesus is urging people to come into his kingdom. Neither your badness nor your goodness, neither your guilt nor your innocence should keep you out.

Last week, our focus was on the younger brothers. This week, it's on the older brothers. Good, loyal, respectable people.

Have you repented of your sin? Have you put your trust in Jesus who died on the cross for the forgiveness of your sin and turned back to God?

If not, I'd love to talk to you or talk to a Christian friend who can point you in the right direction and show you how you might do that. But secondly, second implication, the parable of the prodigal son finishes on exactly the same note as the two previous parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin.

A celebration, a party. As such, it is a challenge to any individual or church which has lost sight of Jesus' compassion and love for the lost.

[27 : 40] It's why our mission statement as Grace Church Dulwich, if you've seen it on our website, is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Now, it's possible, of course, to look at that and think to yourself, well, hang on a moment, surely that's rather too narrow a focus.

And yet, if this, if it's this above all that gives God joy, then far from being too narrow a focus, in fact, there's everything right with it.

which means, as well, of course, that the parable not only reveals God's heart, but also it reveals our hearts.

Whether we are committed to the same things that he is committed to, whether we are committed as he is to searching for the lost, whether we rejoice as he does when the lost are found, not to mention the priorities and passions that do in practice shape our lives.

Why don't we pray together? It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this, your brother was dead and is alive.

[28 : 58] He was lost and is found. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for your compassion on lost people, those who are far from you, whether bad or good, who turn and repent.

Thank you for the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross for our sins. Thank you for this warm welcome that you give to those who turn to you. And we pray, Heavenly Father, as a church and as individuals, might we share your great compassion for the lost.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.