

A Change of Atmosphere

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn together now to Luke chapter 15, that passage from verse 25 to the end of the chapter, verse 32. As we've looked at this parable though, we've looked at it looking at, first of all, a change of company when the younger son decided that he would be best leaving home and making his way to follow his own inclinations and that took him into the far country.

Then we looked at a change of mind when he came to himself, when he realized the great mistake that he had made and when he realized that life was not what it seemed to be as he promised himself, freedom from his father's house.

Then we saw that he came back having resolved to do so, he arose, he came to his father and last time we saw the reception he received, the change of status that he received from his father as he came back and was restored as a son and given such an elevation, such a tremendous promotion as he came to wear these clothes and this ring and these shoes that showed that he was indeed a member of the family and not a slave.

And tonight this final part of this wonderful parable we're looking at under the heading of a change of atmosphere. Because when you come into this last part of the parable, as you begin to read about the older son, about this brother that had remained at home with the father, and as you get into the passage and see his reaction and response to the reception, the welcome, the celebration over the younger brother's return, you feel a very chilly atmosphere coming into the picture as you see that.

He carries with him that very chilly air, that coldness, that nasty, self-righteous spirit that really looks down and condemns everything that has happened, both in the son's return and in the father's welcome.

[2 : 1 7] So there's two things from that that we can look at this evening to finish off the study of the chapter. There's first of all a hostile reaction on the part of this older brother.

And there's secondly a heartfelt retort. That's the father actually getting back to him or putting his argument back to himself, as we'll see in a very gentle, calm and wonderful way.

But the younger son is, of course, safe and has been restored. So let's look at this hostile reaction. There is, first of all, the inevitable opposition that we can call it.

Because as soon as this younger son is back with the father and restored back into the family, up comes this opposition. In comes this hostility.

And that's so true to the Bible's teaching right through it in regard to what it is to be a follower of Jesus. As soon as you become a follower of Christ, you become a target for this kind of hostility.

[3 : 2 4] As we've seen earlier in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 12, for example, just cast your mind back to that, where Jesus was setting out the kind of life that we must be ready for as followers of his.

Not to put us off from following him. Not to actually conclude, well, if that's what it's going to be like, that's not for me. It's the very opposite of Jesus in mind. He does indeed insist that we do follow him.

But he insists that we must know something of what that's going to be like. And that's in verses 49 to 53 of chapter 12, where he says, I have come not to give peace on earth.

No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two, two against three, and they will be divided, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

By which Jesus meant, as we saw then when we looked at it, the kind of differences that come into human society, whether it's in a single home, or in a community, or in a nation, or in a congregation indeed, through the fact of conversions, through the fact of people leaving the service of the world and coming openly into the following of Christ.

[4 : 45] Remember the apostles as well in Acts chapter 14, when they were at Lystra there, they knew themselves the hostility that they faced as apostles of Christ, and as they were there stoned at Lystra, the disciples gathered around them when they preached the gospel in that city, and it made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, this is when they were in Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith.

How did they strengthen the souls of the disciples? How did they encourage them to continue in the faith? By hiding the real truth of what it meant to be a Christian from them?

No. But saying that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

That's one of the things they constantly emphasized. That following Jesus Christ attracts hostility. And we know that that's the case in our own generation increasingly.

You can find it in our own land. We're thinking tonight later in the fellowship of persecution. There are people in this country itself tonight who are persecuted because they're Christians.

[6 : 08] And it isn't just that they're persecuted by Muslims and persecuted by people of other faiths. They are like this young brother was, persecuted within the church.

That's the sad thing. You expect it from Islam. You expect it from other sources that are not Christian. You don't expect it inside the church. And you can say this is a picture really for us of what ought not to be found.

Here is a young man who has come back to his father representing those who had gone away from a distance from God and had come back to him and been received. Here is this elder brother representing those named in verse 2 of the chapter.

The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying this man receives sinners and eats with them. These were the people who actually named themselves by God. By the religion of God.

By the religion that looked for a Messiah. Here is the Messiah speaking to them and they are constantly rejecting him. And those that do accept him such as Nicodemus a very interesting study in three passages in John's Gospel where Nicodemus comes to the surface and disappears again then back to the surface in chapter 3 his first meeting with Christ he is told he must be born again.

[7 : 31] Chapter 7 then he speaks up in defense of Christ before the Jewish council and he is sneered at and looked at with disdain in such a way that they throw at him this particular accusation Are you also from Galilee?

That's inside the ruling synagogue the people who religiously ought to be better than they are in regard to Christ then of course Nicodemus comes to the surface again thirdly at the cross of Christ where he carefully and lovingly attends to the dead body of Christ where he comes openly into the public view as a disciple and from then on is not in any way hidden.

That's another study but the point that's made here is that this older brother represents hostility to those who are converted on the part of those who should know better.

It's the Pharisee it's the scribe it's that mindset that does not regard following Christ fully or that sort of commitment to him as really at all necessary or at all good for a person.

I'm not going to go into the various ways in which you find that today in the church but that is what you find with regard to people who say they're Christians and yet make it obvious they're not really Christians in the sense of being born again and fully committed to Christ and they have a hostility to those who are.

[9 : 11] And there are ministers tonight who can only preach the gospel with difficulty I'm not saying they're not doing it faithfully but there are places where if you preach the gospel faithfully and you call people lost sinners even if they live a decent life civilly in communities still you will actually face hostility for that because it will be thrown back at you and say we're not sinners we don't need to be actually regarded as sinners in need of salvation.

The church needs to welcome all. We're praying for revival we're praying for God to come into our communities we're praying for God to effectively use us as people who must reach out with the gospel what are we expecting in return to our prayers what are we expecting what God begins to work that he will bring people just exactly like ourselves no because if we are actually serious as we must be about evangelism then our evangelism is going to go to people who are very different in their outlook and in their upbringing and in their connection with the church compared to ourselves and in the way we regard things in terms of serving God and following God and looking at the things of the kingdom of God but the New Testament shows us from the time of the apostles onwards that the church of Christ in this world has to be a place where people are welcomed whatever their background where people are welcomed as they sincerely seek an answer to the great problems of human life and where people come to be we trust united together in the grace of

Christ that's the great point of Ephesians 2 isn't it that we read where we saw that these two different people the Jew and the Gentile as Paul calls it there two people as if they were two individuals who were really in hostility with each other who really opposed to each other and he is saying that through the cross he has reconciled them not just to God but to each other there is no place in the church of Christ for the attitude that says you are a Pharisee you can't be part of our group of our set up whatever people we have around us are people who need the gospel who need Christ and if Christ comes to bring them into our fellowship and if Christ comes to change their lives in such a way or even if he doesn't immediately do that but brings them concern in some way for their soul or for their well being and seeking him through the church through coming to yourselves through coming to church services whatever it might be the older brother here is a lesson to us how not to react how not to have that sort of attitude to them this reconciliation is one that brings an inevitable opposition and we must realize that but it must not be and should not be found amongst the people who belong to the church of

Christ the second thing is that you can see in his hostile reaction his introverted objection if you read verse 29 but he answered his father look these many years I have 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 what would you call him what adjective would you use to describe him the best one I think is self righteous utterly self righteous he is after all in the way Jesus gives out the parable the representative of the Pharisees and scribes who strongly objected to Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them people that they looked down on people who didn't deserve to be in the kingdom of

God people who weren't wanted in the company of the real people the holy people of God the religious people of God that's their attitude that's exactly how they thought in the thinking and in the proclamation of this older brother you see how self-righteousness thinks because self-righteousness as here sees the father as owing him something for his work self-righteousness always that there is room for grace in the relationship he has with his father that his working for his father ought to be an honor that is something that he himself should do gladly not looking for some sort of reward as if he is meritorious as if he deserves it as if it's owing to him self-righteousness always objects when they themselves are not appreciated as they think they should be self-righteousness is very angry because no credit is given to them as they think it should be and you notice the word he uses here these many years

[15:18] I have served you the word served is a strong word doesn't come out quite as strongly in the english translation it's one word which you could really translate very easily and meaningfully look these many years I've been slaving for you that's his attitude to his father he's really been slaving in his mind for his father has just been a drudgery he's had to do this and what reward has he had he hasn't even been given a young kid a young goat and here's this brother of his who wasted his life for all of these years and he's now back and been welcomed back into the home and as soon as he's back home the father has killed the fattened calf reserved for special occasions that's been done for him you've done nothing like that for me he doesn't know anything about what a real father is or what a real son is he has no idea of grace everything is on merit

I deserve this I've done this you owe me this but you've never done it that's why self-righteousness isn't just objecting to not being appreciated as it thinks but self-righteousness also objects when a welcome is given to those who are regarded as not even worthy of being received that's what self-righteousness is like that's why he calls him here your son or the son of yours in verse 30 who has devoured your property with prostitutes he doesn't say my brother you notice that's what self-righteousness is like that's why we need to give it such space that's why in a sense it's so difficult to speak about it because every time we're speaking about it we're speaking about something that is essentially true of ourselves and that we need to combat and that we need grace to overcome he doesn't like this reception that's been given to his younger brother he doesn't understand why it's necessary he doesn't understand what true love and true grace is about he doesn't understand what forgiveness is he doesn't understand at all anything except this legalistic relationship that he has with his father where he thinks that he deserves far more than he's ever been given well what does that mean for ourselves well for a start it means that we should see self righteous as a hideous thing it's one of the worst forms of human behavior and human traits that you can come across it's ingrained in our hearts deeply we're in love with ourselves until God takes us out of that and even when God has taken us out of that there's still a tendency to go back to that and to see ourselves in a way that regards ourselves better than we really are you see the fact is that although this young this older brother had never literally left home in terms of his relationship with his father he was just as far away from him as the younger son ever was in the far country he is familiar with the things of home but he really doesn't know his father and isn't that solemn that we can be so familiar with the things of our religion with the things of our church with the things of the bible with the things of church services that we can be so familiar with things which are in themselves so necessary and so good that we can serve the lord in that open way and still not know our father still not know him personally as a god in communion with our souls still not know him as our greatest friend still not go to him to share the deep things of life with him and even the simple things of life

I can't imagine this older brother ever going to his father with a problem now he would sort it himself I can't imagine him ever opening his heart to his father he wouldn't regard his father as really for that sort of thing he's familiar with the things of home but he doesn't know his father he's really distant from him he's a stranger to him is it like that with any of us and god somebody said god sends away empty only those who are full of themselves god sends away empty only those who are full of themselves you can change the words a little bit and say god only sends away empty those who are full of themselves he never sends anyone else away when there's space in their lives for him but those who are full of themselves those who are self righteous those who think they're just as good if not better than others those who don't make room for the righteousness of christ he sends them that's what the bible says the humble he draws close to him but the proud he holds at a distance or sends away empty and you find that very tellingly brought forth brought out in a future chapter there in chapter 18 where you find the famous incident of the pharisee and the tax collector which really illustrates brilliantly the same point that Jesus is making in this parable where he uses the elder brother the older brother to bring out this point the two men went up to the temple to pray one a pharisee the other a tax collector the kind of person the pharisee would just not even bother to look at in any sense acceptingly he wouldn't even think about brushing past him and asking him anything or having anything to do with him pharisee said I thank you god that

I'm not like other men extortioners unjust adulterers or even like this tax collector I fast twice a week I give tithes of all that I get but the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast saying god be merciful to me the sinner I tell you said Jesus this man went down to his house justified rather than the other for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted there is the hostility the younger brother faced it's the hostility of self-righteousness it's the hostility that is an inevitable opposition to someone who has truly come to know Christ it's the introverted objection and opposition that looks in upon himself all the time that wants justification for everything everybody else does or doesn't do him all of that is within himself and it's a horrible picture it's grotesque it's nasty it's bad secondly there's a heartfelt response or retort because the father in the picture actually comes to him and tries to calm him down and encourages him to come in he's saying his father went out and entreated him and then he replied in that way to his father and then 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 dear brother was dead and is alive he was lost and is found the first thing his father is saying to him is it was fitting it was appropriate that we celebrate now the word fitting there is a word which really means needful or necessary or most necessary because his father is not saying to this was something that we decided to do that we thought was appropriate what his father is really saying is this was absolutely necessary why was it necessary because it was the right and only thing to do and that goes back to the way the chapter throughout the chapter says to us that there is rejoicing even in heaven over one sinner that repents because he was alive and is dead dead and is alive and was lost and is found celebrating over people's conversion is not just something that is appropriate it is something that is necessary something that is done in heaven and if it is done in heaven surely it should be done among ourselves now you notice he is saying here it was fitting because your brother was dead and is alive he was lost and is found same as verse 24 his my son was dead and is alive again he was lost and is found and they began to celebrate well he hadn't been literally dead but he was dead as far as his relationship to his father was concerned and to all intents and purposes he was in fact dead he was away in a lost country in a far country lost to the father except that the father thought about him every day as we saw last time but he was effectively to all intents and purposes lost are we really lost do we believe we're lost are we really dead do we believe we're dead this young man didn't until he came to himself and you don't believe you're dead unless

you've come to realize your lost condition unless you've turned to the Lord and seriously dealt with the teaching of the Bible for yourself as an individual that's what's absolutely crucial for us that we actually understand this as Ephesians 2 again put it we didn't read the first part of it but that's how it begins you who were dead in trespasses and sins that's you and that's me as we are in ourselves represented by this younger brother yes and by this older brother at a distance from the father spiritually he's just as dead in his self righteousness as the younger brother was in his open debauched lifestyle but do you believe tonight do I believe tonight that this is really true of myself of yourselves that we're dead that we need to be brought alive by God that we are actually lost that we need to be rescued your life and my life needs a lot more than just a little bit of dressing up a little patchwork here and there something in your mind that needs to kick over so that you begin to see things differently your whole heart and my whole heart needs to be changed needs to be turned inside out or might say it is inside out already because sin has done that it needs to be put back the right way and until we realize truly and accept this is God's truth concerning us how are we going to seek the

[28 : 01] Lord how are we going to meaningfully seek the Lord why should we seek the Lord meaningfully unless we really do believe that we need him to bring us to life that we need him to rescue us from our lostness isn't that what Newton's great hymn says amazing grace following the teaching of scripture and putting it into that hymn that is so often sung and has been sung more often than any other hymn ever that was written amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me I once was lost but now I'm found blind but now I see the same thing in the previous passages regarding the sheep and the coin a man having a hundred sheep if he has lost one of them he leaves the ninety-nine to go and search the one that's lost until he finds it same with a woman with a lost coin she loses one coin it's not just been put aside and it's at the back of her mind where it is it's lost and she has to go in search of it until she finds it the Lord knows where we are the Lord knows our spiritual condition the Lord knows our lostness and he knows where to find us but what he's saying to you and to me as well tonight is this believe this word of mine that tells you you are lost and you need my rescue believe that you are dead and you need my quickening my spirit to bring you to life and that's what this young man has done and that's what this older brother of his did not but then do we rejoice do we rejoice over conversions well should we do

I know we do but do we rejoice to this extent do we rejoice to the extent as this chapter puts it that our soul is absolutely thrilled with it because that is what it's like in heaven and not only that but do rejoice thoughtfully about it are we thoughtfully glad what do we mean by that I mean by that are we glad through a sense of really thinking about what this what has happened in this person or that person's conversion where they were and where they now are are we glad because we've thought of the great difference that is between being dead and being alive between being lost and being found every congregation should have elements of rejoicing of course every congregation as we pray to God should have rejoicing over conversions there's something wrong when there are no conversions in a congregation also something wrong when there are conversions but no rejoicing the two go together here is a young lost son who's come back home to his father and the place erupts into rejoicing apart from the self-righteous one well do we rejoice there's celebration that was appropriate and then there's this point which is also very important we'll finish with it there is a salvation that was available to him not just a celebration that was appropriate but a salvation that was available he said to him son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours in other words he's correcting the thinking of this older brother his thinking was you have never given me anything and his father is saying son everything I have is for you if you can just ask for it all you have to do is ask that's the problem he's never done that the Pharisees and the scribes rejected

Jesus rejected him as God's Messiah but God did not reject them at this stage Christ had not written off these Pharisees and scribes though they had so obviously rejected him and that's what's represented by this statement son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours the Jews as they rejected Christ this is the Lord speaking to them and saying everything in God's house everything that you have been brought up with everything that's represented in the sacrifices of the Old Testament everything in those rituals that lead up to this New Testament age that is all yours if you will have it you are still with me and all that is mine is yours and all that is still God's view and God's attitude towards the Jewish people and we remember that when we pray for Jewish evangelism that God has not written them off even though presently as a people only a bare few of them have come to accept Jesus as their

Lord it's still true that all that God has in his salvation is for them as much as for the Gentiles but then that's the problem in John chapter 5 Jesus put it this way remember there how he spoke to the Jews in their resistance to him and in their dismissing of his teaching and in chapter 39 this is what he said to them you are searching the scripture because you think that in them you have eternal life and of course he was really recognizing in that that they were quite right to think that this is where God had revealed himself in the scriptures of the Old Testament as they were then and thinking in them you have eternal life yes that's how eternal life comes to us through God's revealed will in the scriptures and it is they that bear witness about me well they didn't accept that of course but Christ is driving the point home the very scriptures that you are searching thinking in them you have eternal life they actually bear witness about me then he comes to drive the point home he says yet you will not come to me that you may have life you will not come to me that you may have life it's not their view of scripture that's really the problem for the

Jews in those days of Christ they were searching the scriptures as they still do the problem was that they were not coming to him in order to have the life that the scriptures spoke about you and I have to take careful note of that too you have a high view of scripture you believe that this is the word of God you read the Bible with that conviction you use it in your own life personally as a book unlike any other a book in which God has placed himself a book that testifies as Jesus said about himself but you can have all that and still be lost unless you come to himself you remain lost you will not come to me that you might have life somebody put it this way the tragedy of life is not that it ends so soon but that we wait so long to begin it to begin it or to begin living it in other words we put off living as we should by coming to Christ and that's the tragedy not that life is so short but that we wait so long to begin living it don't wait a moment longer come to him that you might have life let's pray lord our god we pray that you would save us from ourselves but we know that self-righteousness marks our very hearts we pray lord that you would save us from that outlook that regards ourselves as better than or as good as others help us lord to follow your own example that we might have this mind in us also that was also in

[37 : 59] Christ Jesus the mind that would regard others better than ourselves that would give ourselves in the service of others that would truly live and walk humbly with our god we ask that you bless us now in the fellowship that you bless to us the food prepared for us and make us thankful for it continue with us we pray for Jesus sake amen