

The Fulfilling God

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[0 : 00] If I haven't met you, I'd love to meet you. Come and say hi afterwards. I want to give you a bit of a heads up for what's going to happen at the end of this sermon. We know that God speaks to us through his word.

And I don't think we often give enough space after the sermon to deal with or consider or think through or pray through what God has spoken to us about.

And so at the end of the service today, what I'd like us to do is we're going to stand. At the end of the sermon, sorry, we're going to stand. The band's going to come up. We're going to sing.

And there's going to be a couple at each of these prayer stations. Two at the front, one in each corner at the back. And they're folks who are on our prayer team. And if God speaks to you through his word this evening and you feel like, I need to do business with God.

I need to pray with somebody about what God has spoken to me tonight. Then these wonderful people would love to pray with you. So that's what we're going to do at the end of the sermon.

[1 : 09] So here we go. We're week five into a series tracking with the Life Explored course happening in some of the home groups. And each week we're looking at a different aspect of God's character.

This week it's the fulfilling God. And we're looking very appropriately at Luke 15 and looking at a couple of folks who try and find fulfillment in various ways. And the passage you heard it read so well by Maeve there is commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son or the lost son.

It's not actually entirely accurate though, is it? Because it's a story of two lost sons and one very incredibly compassionate and loving father.

And the story Jesus tells starts in verse 11. But if we go back to verse 1, if you have your Bibles open and you look at verse 1 right there, it gives us the context. Now the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them. So Jesus is spending a lot of time with the wrong people in terms of the religious elite's mind. He's eating with sinners and tax collectors.

[2 : 20] Now why does he include this subgroup of tax collectors? So we talked about these guys a few weeks ago, didn't we? Tax collectors weren't just any old sinners. They were reviled. These were Jews who were collecting taxes from other Jews to give to the Romans.

And they were wealthy because they swindled people. They charged more tax than they needed and kept the difference. I watched a video the other day of New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

And she was sort of grilling this head of this pharmaceutical company. And she says, this is just last week, she says, why does an HIV treatment cost \$2,000 in America when that same treatment costs \$8 in Australia?

And she was getting to this idea that some of these pharmaceutical execs are just profiting out of misery. Now that's a pretty good modern day parallel with these ancient tax collectors.

So here is Jesus. He's not just ministering to them. He's going to their homes. He's spending time with them. He's staying with them. He's eating with them. And the religious elites hated him for it.

[3 : 40] So Jesus tells a parable. And in the parable, he's talking to both the traditional sinners, tax collectors, sinners, etc.

But he's also talking to these religious elites, these Pharisees. And he's got a message for them. He's saying, you're both lost. And the thing is, you guys know it.

You guys don't know it. But you're lost as well. It's a fairly scandalous sort of parable here. So let's get into it. Now, I don't have a three-point sermon. I'm just going to walk through the parable. And then at the end, we'll sort of talk about some of the big ideas.

Okay, let's get right into it. Verse 11, there was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to the father, Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.

It's the very first line. The first listeners would have shuddered at this, would have been agog, aghast, whatever word you want to put in there. It's just shocked by it.

[4 : 42] The younger of the two sons is asking for an early inheritance. He's saying to his father, would you chop up the ancestral land and give me my share now?

I just want the money. I read a scholar who spent decades in the Middle East. And he said over a 15-year period, he would randomly talk to people and tell them this parable, especially this first line.

The younger of them said to his father, give me my share of the property. And he said in 15 years, the response to all these people was always the same.

He would say to this folk in the Middle East, this person he just met in the Middle East, who would tell them the sons' request. And he would say, has anyone you know ever made a request like this in your village? The person would say, never.

Well, could anyone make such a request? Impossible would be the response. Well, let's just say somebody did make that request.

[5 : 41] What would happen? The father would beat them. Why? Because this request means you want your father to die.

You might think that's a bit over the top, but think about it for a moment. What is the son asking for? He's saying, I want your stuff, but I don't want you.

He wanted what the father could give him, knowing it would destroy the relationship. I want your stuff, but I don't really need you. So it's a really awful request. But what's more surprising is the response of the father.

The father says, yes. He carves up the family land. He sells a parcel of off, and he gives it to the son. Sometimes people ask me if I miss New Zealand.

And there's aspects of it I do. I miss the people, but I really miss the land. There is, in the old country, you feel really connected to the land.

[6 : 44] So when I think about New Zealand, I think about certain mountains or certain bodies of water. It's just this cultural thing. You really feel connected to the land. Now, in the ancient areas, it was this a thousand times amplified.

People felt like they belonged to the land. But the father chops up the land. Awful.

Like, humiliating for the father to do this. He would have lost standing in his community. And on top of that, he's enduring the worst thing a human can endure, which is rejected love.

So the youngest son, he walks off the family farm. He's rich. He has an opportunity to live independently. He's got a big grin on his face. He takes off to a new town. He's throwing his money around.

Everyone loves him. The prodigal life is good. Prodigal means extravagant, right? The extravagant life is good. Until one morning, he wakes up. It's 11 o'clock. He can't find his pants.

[7 : 44] He's only got one shoe. And he's got this hangover. And there's no food in the fridge. There's no money left in the wallet anymore. And on top of that, there's a famine.

And back in the days, of course, there's no social services. So what does he do? He hires himself out as a worker to a pig farmer. My mother, after she divorced her first husband, his name was Dave.

Dave didn't pay any child support. She had three kids, three little kids. Here's the true story. And the police were going to throw Dave in prison for not paying child support. And my mother didn't want to have children, didn't want her kids to have a father in prison.

So the solution for her was to earn some extra money. Apparently, if you get to a certain sort of financial threshold, the ex can avoid jail.

The only job she could find was getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning, going to a local farmer and cleaning out pig pens for a few hours. And then coming home, kids were waking up, get the kids off to school.

[8 : 53] So, you know, true story. So, humiliating work, soul-destroying work. Now, imagine if my mother had a religion that taught her that working with pigs made her spiritually unclean and made her a social outcast.

And imagine if there was no greater moral cause. Because in her mind, she's doing this for her children. She's got this great cause, right? Keep the ex out of prison. Imagine if you're only doing this to survive.

Imagine doing this riddled with guilt for wasting your life. This is what it was like for the prodigal son. And it was so bad for him. He looked at the food that the pigs were eating and just desired it and longed for it.

He was so hungry. It's a brutal story, isn't it? He left home, loaded, independent, trying to find happiness and fulfillment.

And now he's a Jewish kid starving in a pigsty. So, he comes to his senses and he thinks, you know, my father's slaves are doing better than me.

[9 : 52] I'm going to go home and become a slave to my father. So, he writes this speech. And he heads back. He packs his bag and he heads back. And you can imagine walking, rehearsing the speech on his way home.

Father, I have sinned. No, beloved father, I have sinned. I, I have sinned. You know, imagine we're trying to get the intonation really right. So, it sounds really dramatic and stuff.

You know, so his plan is to become the slave or the servant of his hired worker. Perhaps he could pay his father back, restore some of the honor. And the parable sees he's nearing home and he's far off.

This is verse 20 now. And the father sees and runs to him. Runs to him. And my, and my, my kids' school, they have a sports day.

And, and one of the events is the parents' sprint. And, and, and thankfully was busy that day, uh, this year. But it's just, I mean, it's ridiculous.

[10 : 52] These horrendously out of shape parents just lumbering down the field, you know, looking ridiculous. I did it two years ago. I, like, literally I couldn't walk for like a week.

I was just, which surprises you, I know. Um, anyway, back in the ancient Near East, fathers didn't run anywhere. Like, not wealthy, rich, landowning fathers.

They didn't run anywhere. But this father ran to his son and he kissed him. And the grammar in the original language, which was Greek, suggested he just kisses and kisses and kisses him.

He's just, he's overjoyed. The youngest son starts his speech. Father, I have, you know. And he rolls out his restitution plan.

But do you notice? The father cuts him off. He only, he only gets through half the speech. He doesn't get to the point where he says or he suggests how he can make things right.

[11 : 53] He never gets to that point because the father interrupts him. And by doing that, the father is saying, you son, you have no solution to this problem. There's nothing you can do to make restitution.

Because you don't have to earn your way back to me. And it's such a natural thing, such a natural way for us to think though, isn't it? You know, we wander from God. We do our own thing.

And we turn up to church on a Sunday. And we think, right, I'm going to double down on my holiness. And the father says, you're my daughter. You're my son.

I love you. I am so glad you're here. And in our story, the son, he doesn't just get a hug and a kiss.

He gets a huge party. Verse 23 there. Let's roast the cow. Let's celebrate. And the whole town's going to come along. But first, bring my son my robe, my precious robe, my number one robe, my shoes and my ring.

[12 : 59] And the robe was the robe that the father would have worn to banquets. And it represented the father's honor. It represented his status. And he puts it on the son.

So this boy, who would have been reviled by the community, the community knows what he's done. He can turn up to the party wearing his father's status.

He's covered by who his father is. And it's a beautiful image. The father is reconciled to the son. And the father reconciles the son to the community.

And this is the gospel, isn't it? When we come to God, we don't bring our own track record. We bring Christ's track record. We bring Christ's perfection.

And God accepts it. So tonight, if you're here and you feel shame, you know you believe, you know you're a Christian, but you do feel shame.

[13 : 57] And maybe you can be embarrassed, even embarrassed just to pray to God, to be here. Remember this. You're wearing your father's robe. You're wearing the status of your heavenly father.

So it's a great story, isn't it? Wonderful story. Who wouldn't be happy about this? Well, the older brother's not happy. And that's the second half.

And sort of faster now. The second half actually mirrors the first half in many ways. So we learn here in the second half, verse 25 onwards, that the older brother is also lost. See, the younger brother, he's lost this.

It's quite easy to spot. He was selfish and self-indulgent and he wastes his money on stupid things. But the older one's lostness, that's a bit more subtle.

So what happens in the story? So the parable moves on. The older son, he hears there's a party going on. He finds out it's for his younger brother because he's come back. But he refuses to go to the party, which would have been a slight against the father.

[15 : 01] He's furious. So what does the father do? Verse 28. He goes out to meet him. It's wonderful. Such grace. The father comes out to meet him, just as he did go out and meet the younger son.

And the older one just rips into the father. Notice he doesn't even call him father. He says, look. Look, you. You can sense the anger in the sentence there.

People just didn't talk to their parents like this back in the days. This was a public humiliation. And the father allowed it. You gave him a cow.

You gave the guy a cow. I couldn't even get a goat for me and my mates. And there's this very revealing line here. It says, I served you all these years.

That word serve, it means slave. The older brother says, I slaved for you. See, his relationship with the father was broken as well.

[16 : 14] He lived with the father. The older son lived with the father, but not as a beloved son. He lived with his father with the spirit of a slave.

And the older brother goes on. He says, I never disobeyed you all these years. He's been counting the years. I did everything right. You owe me. And then the father speaks.

And he says, son. And he tries to help him to understand what a wonderful thing it is that the younger brother's come back. And he's returned. And he assures the older brother that all he has is his.

And it's this wonderfully gracious moment. So you stand back now, right? And you see both these brothers. The younger brother, rebellious, estranged while in his far off land.

And the older brother, estranged whilst present in the house. He was as sinful as the younger brother. He just left the father without ever leaving the farm.

[17 : 18] He left the faith, never left the church. Now, how does the story end? Does it all work out? We don't know. It's a parable. We don't know what the response was.

Jesus just ends it. It's a cliffhanger. But it doesn't appear that there is any reconciliation between the father and the older brother. Okay. Remembering that this is a parable, how do we interpret it?

Well, let's think about the characters very quickly. Who the characters are. Who do they represent? The younger brother. The younger brother. He's the tax collectors, isn't it? He's the tax collectors. He's the sinners. Jesus has been hanging out.

The younger brother is the obvious sinner. He's selfish. He's self-indulgent. He's a big target. Look at that guy. The sinner. But the older brother. Who's that? That's obviously the Pharisees.

It's the very religious. Bitter at the grace extended to the younger brother. But he was just as alienated from the father. But instead of becoming alienated by doing bad, he became alienated by doing good.

[18 : 21] The younger brother used the father to get what he wanted. And so did the older brother. I never disobeyed you. You owe me. That was his argument. He was also using the father just to get what he wanted.

And we become older brothers when we want to control God by being good. And at that point, Jesus is no longer your savior. He's just the rewarder of the cool stuff that you do.

And that is not the gospel. Do not let your goodness keep you from the father. Lastly, let's not forget the father.

He's a pretty key character here. Father's God. He's the heavenly father. And this parable tells us wonderful things about God. He presents to the Pharisees a heavenly father that they're not familiar with.

A father that is generous and tender and really important, is joyful. The father celebrates. He wants to celebrate. His kids come home. He wants to celebrate.

[19 : 23] Now, if you look at the passage, these two really short parables just before this, you might remember these ones. There's a parable of the lost coin. And there's a parable of the lost sheep.

And the good news is both of those things are found. And what happens when both of those things are found in the parables? They throw a party. Just like our parable. What's the point? We have a happy God.

Who is particularly happy when his children come back to him. What else do we learn about this father? This father is willing to be humiliated for the sake of reconciliation.

The cross being the greatest example of this. Okay, let me finish up here. Folks, if you're looking for major themes here, I'll give you three words.

Lostness, sacrifice, and joy. Lostness, sacrifice, and joy. Lostness. Lostness can play out in various ways in our lives, can't it?

[20 : 20] This is what we learn here. You can be lost in your badness, and you can be lost in your goodness, thinking you are just pretty all right and doing really well. And therefore, you know, God has to love you.

You're still lost. Lostness, sacrifice. The father endured shame for the sake of reconciliation. Christ endured the worst that humanity could throw at him for the sake of reconciliation so that we could be with him.

Lostness, sacrifice, and joy. Why does God rescue us? It's nice, of course. He's a good God, yes. It works out really well for us. Yes, yes, yes.

But joy. It makes the father joyful to do this. Now, we're going to take a few minutes to consider Christ's words now.

The band's going to come up and play. We're going to stand. We're going to sing. Remember, there's going to be a prayer team here, here, here, and here. You simply go there during the song, and they will ask you one question.

[21 : 29] How can we pray for you? And you say, can you pray about this? It's very simple. Now, why would you go for prayer? Why would you do that? Because it's a courageous thing.

You've got to sort of weave your way through. Why would you do this? Well, perhaps you're going to pray for prayer. Well, perhaps you are the younger brother. Perhaps you are out, and you're basically doing kind of whatever you want.

You're running from God. You're seeking fulfillment. And you're starting to think it's a bit hollow. Well, you need to come back to Jesus.

You need to come and talk to your heavenly father about that. But maybe you're the older brother. You look okay. But you're going through the motions.

You don't love the father like you did. It's all kind of just rote. You're kind of just hoping to get by on good behavior.

[22 : 36] That's a miserable way to live the Christian faith. Well, perhaps your view of God is that he is distant. And joyless.

And this is not who God is. And God wants to offer you something incredible. For the younger brother, he wants to offer the gift of sonship.

The gift of daughtership. If you do not know him. And for the older brother, he wants to remind you. That you're his son.

You're his daughter. You don't have to earn this. You wear the father's robe. And walk gladly in that. If that is you. Or perhaps something else pressing in on your life right now.

And you would like prayer. Then would you do a courageous thing? When we start singing. Will you just get up out of your seat. And go to one of these corners over here.

[23 : 41] And these folks would love to pray with you. So let's do that now. Thank you. Because you're told to sing. Thank you. Because you're the first thing.

Oh, you've got to be in here.