The Way of Self-Righteousness (PM)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 August 2021

Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0:00] So, the rest of us, let's talk about the prodigal son, sorry, the prodigal father and his two lost sons. So, Jesus tells this story, he tells it to a particular audience, which is the Pharisees, I don't know if you caught that in the beginning, and he tells it to that audience for a particular reason, which is that they have a false story about God.

So, the chapter starts like this, now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him, that is Jesus, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.
And Jesus, as a reply to this grumbling, shares three different stories about the joy of finding things that are lost. So, in the Pharisees' world, in their story about the world, God does not want sinners to come back to him.
Lost people in the Pharisees' world are lost. They're lost for good, and good riddance to them. They don't deserve to be with God. But in these parables, Jesus is giving a different story.
He's giving the true story about God. And he's saying in the story, God is the prodigal father. God is the God who loves to find lost people. Now, you're probably wondering why I keep saying prodigal father.
[1:27] Prodigal is just a word that means excessive. It means reckless. And usually people call this the parable of the prodigal son, because it's about all the spending that the son does. He goes out and just blows all his money.

So, it's prodigal. It's excessive spending. But really, when Jesus tells the story, it's the story of the prodigal father. Because it's the father that spends recklessly, excessively grace on his children, especially the lost ones.
And in order to show how excessive and how reckless God's love is, Jesus tells us this parable. And this is a very strong parable. He's trying to describe someone that is as lost as you could possibly imagine.
As lost as the younger son gets. And the lostness he describes here, it's not like losing a set of keys or losing your daughter in an elevator. He's describing a conscious, willful rejection that this son has for the father.
This is the story of an adult son spitting in his father's face and walking away. So, it says, 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.
[2:43] And he divided his property between them. So, in this culture, to demand the property early is just saying, essentially, I wish you were dead. And to take it and leave and go somewhere else is saying, to me, you are dead.

This is like stealing your parents' pension fund. It's not caring whether they have enough to live or not. And so, what Jesus is describing here is just relationship shattering.
This younger son, with his community, with his father, he shattered those relationships. Even the idea of like selling the family farm, like that doesn't quite capture how serious this is.
For the Jews in this time, land is their identity. And so, to sell your land and just take off is beyond shameful. Especially if you just kind of squander it, which is what the son does, right?
Not many days later, the younger son gathered up all he had and he took a journey into a far country and there he squandered his property in reckless living or prodigal living.
[3:54] 70% of lottery winners lose their winnings in seven years or less. And that's what happens here to the prodigal son.

Just like a Powerball winner, by verse 14, the inheritance is gone. It's been scattered recklessly. It's like chaff into the wind. It's just disappeared. Now, you may be imagining, as you imagine him just

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

spending all this money.
I liked how they did it in the peg people. He just kind of had a little drink out of a jug. But you may be imagining that this is just like completely morally bankrupt spending.
And the reason that is in verse 30 at the end of the parable, that's how the older brother describes the younger brother. He says, oh, you know, these are the types of sins that he's been doing with his money. But what's interesting is that Jesus doesn't actually comment on that at all.
He doesn't comment on the morality of the spending. Those are coming out of the words of the mouth of the older brother. I think what Jesus wants us to see here is that the sin is less what he does with the money and more that he has dishonored and abandoned his father, that he's broken that relationship and he's taken and sold and left his duty, the place that he belongs.
[5:13] So the spending, in a sense, is almost incidental compared to what kicks it off. Now, the Pharisees by now are supposed to see that their attention is focused in the wrong place.

And the sin that we share as people is the state of sin. That is, we're all separated from our father. We have this disposition towards selfishness, inward looking, self-promotion.
And Jesus is telling this parable to turn the spotlight onto the source of human sin, which is turning away from the father, becoming separated from the father.
Back to the son. So everything's gone, and before long, he gets hungry. He's looking at the pods that the pigs ate. I mean, he's feeding pigs. These are supposed to be unclean to him.
Like, again, like everything in this parable is like, this guy has fallen as far as a person can fall. And he's just sitting there looking at the pods, wishing he could eat them. And the name of the pods leads us to believe that these are inedible to humans.
[6:15] Like, he can't even eat and digest them, even if he could take some. So he's just utterly in need. And this is when things start to change. So finding himself in need, he reconsiders what his options might be.

So he says, So his line of thinking is, Why should I starve when I know a perfectly good place where I can get a job and I can eat?
My father, he feeds his servants well. That's a good job. I should head over there. And what's really interesting about his kind of line of reasoning here is that his motivation in going back seems to just really be hunger.
Like, it's just, it's really just that he needs something. And he thinks the father might be able to give it to him. And so I think, sometimes we think that maybe this is the beginning of his kind of self-improvement.
Or like his kind of turn back towards ethical action. But I don't think that this is conviction or compunction at all. I think that this is hunger and need.
[7:39] And yes, he's rehearsing this apology. But he also brings a plan. He says, I'd like to become your hired servant. Which is kind of like an independent contractor.

That's what we would kind of call it. And so his mentality is here, Like, yeah, I've sinned. You know, I'm no longer your son. That ship has sailed. That's done.
But we can still have a business relationship. And so then I'll have food to eat. And I'll earn back kind of, you know, the money that I lost. And all is going to be well. I'll redefine the terms of our relationship.
And I'll come back on those terms. And I think what we see here is that this plan is not a plan for reconciliation. It's a plan for reparation. So reconciliation is amended and healed relationship.
It's making everything right within a relationship. Reparation is settling accounts, right? It's financial. It's like balancing the books. And that seems to be what he's doing here. And so I'm saying that the son isn't coming back to the father because he's changed.
[8:39] He's coming to get what he needs on his own terms. He was selfish when he left. And he's still selfish on his way back. He's utterly lost. And that's why what happens next is completely unexpected.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.
This is one of the most beautiful lines in scripture. The father spots him a long way off as if he's been just searching the horizon since the son left, waiting for him to come back.
And when he sees the son, he feels hatred, bitterness, rage, disgust, how dare you? No. Compassion.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

How could he possibly feel compassion when he sees the son? He feels compassion for the son's brokenness and lostness and he runs to him.
[9:50] This Middle Eastern nobleman don't run. They don't ever run. It's below their station. This is not a jogging culture. You can imagine them in their robes, right?

The beards. They're not runners. The father pulls up his robes. It's humiliating what he does in front of the village and he runs to greet the son. And he kisses him and he embraces him as part of his family.
He runs to reconcile to the son. He embraces him before he apologizes, before he says anything. 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.
So why doesn't he finish the speech? He planned it. He rehearsed it. Why doesn't he finish it? And I think it's because something about that moment of seeing his father pick up his robes and run to him has changed him.
His heart isn't changed when he's hungry, when he's looking at the pigs. His heart isn't changed on that long journey back to find his father. His heart is changed when he recognizes the true story about God.
[11:03] That he's loved despite his lostness. That he's welcomed despite his selfishness. And that he's forgiven despite his unworthiness. And the father still isn't done.

He gives him the best robe, which is probably the father's own robe, because he would have the best robe in the house. He gives him a ring, which means that he has financial control over the estate again, which is crazy.
Right? The servants come and dress him, which means that he's their master again. He's in charge again. And they kill the fattened calf, which means that they would also invite the entire village to come and see what has happened here.
That this son has been restored to his place. What a scandal. For this my son was dead and is alive again.
He was lost and is found. And they begin to celebrate. Now if you're feeling something like, that's not fair. Or that doesn't make sense.
[12:03] Or that's not how the world works. Then you've gotten the point of the parable. And maybe you're even feeling something like, that doesn't make sense.

But that's me. I know that. I felt that. God has welcomed me like that. And this is the scandal of God's love and acceptance for us. The lost. It's not fair.
It's not earned. God's compassion doesn't really make sense. But it is really good news for us. And so I think one of the most helpful things about this parable, beyond just that image of what it's like when God finds a lost person and how joyful he is to find us, is we can use it as a diagnosis to figure out what kind of story we believe about God.
And so as you're hearing this story, you might relate to different parts. Maybe deep down you believe what the younger son does, which is that the father is kind of an impediment to your happiness.
And life is about trying to get away from him and get what you want. Or maybe that you'd rather have a business relationship with the father, that you'd rather earn what you need, kind of give your time and then take it back when you're done.
[13:20] You could also believe the story that the older son believes, which is if I do what I'm supposed to and I keep the rules, I'll get the thing that's owed to me.

This is the view of God that sees him as a vending machine rather than a father. But this also has a shadow side, which is that if you believe that mistakes have to be punished and lost people can never be found, then there's no room to ever make a mistake.
It's a prison. Jesus sweeps away those false stories with the true story here, that the father always takes the first step towards us in reconciliation.
That before we even made it to the driveway, he was already running to us. That he doesn't need us to do anything or give anything to him. We need him. We need him.
And that where we're still lost, the father loved us. He made a way for us to come back to him through Jesus. He has loved us and forgiven us out of compassion, not out of our works.
[14:23] And we're invited to cling to that story, and in clinging to that story, to be changed in repentance and faith. So, your salvation is not dependent on feeling badly enough for your sin, or

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

coming to God for the right reasons, or never making mistakes and always doing what's expected.

We're saved by trusting that this unbelievably good news, this unbelievably good story, is true. That this is the truest story. That the father watches the horizon for us.
That he has compassion on us. That he's running to embrace us. And that he has made a way back to himself through the cross to be his children again. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host