

The Fulfilling God

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 15 verses 11 to 32 on page 875. Prodigal son, most famous, most well-known, perhaps most wonderful parable Jesus ever told.

If you want to follow along, just take a Bible and open to those pages. There's lots of wonderful details. Sometimes in his parables, Jesus gives us aspects about ourselves and our relation with God and with him.

This parable gives us everything. All at once. So I want to be here for four or five hours. You know, actually, I think we could easily spend 20 sermons on this passage.

It's a perfect mirror for each of us individually, for us as a church. It reveals who God is and reveals why Jesus has come. We had a ministry intern do a little Bible study on this this week.

And he said, on Monday, I feel like I'm 83% the oldest son and 17% the youngest son. And I think that's very clever. Why did Jesus tell it?

[1 : 05] Well, look back at the first couple of verses. They're a group of church people who are very unhappy. A particular kind of unhappiness. They don't like what Jesus is doing. Verse 1 of chapter 15.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him because Jesus was a magnet for tax collectors and sinners.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable.

Actually, he tells them three parables. Here are a group of church people and they're grumbling. They feel entitled to better treatment by Jesus.

They don't understand why he's putting so much time and so much resources into receiving outsiders. And they complain between themselves so as to feel better about themselves.

[1 : 59] Because there's just no joy in their relationship with God. And this is the point of departure. At the center of this chapter is joy, joy, joy, eight times and more.

Look down at verse 7. At the end of the first parable, Jesus says, 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.

Or at the end of the second parable in verse 10. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Or right in the middle of our passage in verse 24, after the youngest son comes home.

Verse 24. This my son was dead and is alive again. And he was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Big, big, big, big joyful word.

Because salvation is about joy. It's about the joy of God. It's about the joy of Jesus Christ, the son of God. It's about the fact that Jesus came to die for us because of the joy that was set before him.

[3 : 11] And it is at heart being found by God and having the joy of being found by God knowing that you were lost. Do you know, we've mentioned joy about a dozen times already in this service.

We've sung it, we've prayed it, we've heard it read. You just sung, make your chosen people joyful. Right after, endure your ministers with righteousness.

Which I think is probably a very good combination. Joy is not happiness. Happiness comes and goes with circumstances. Christian joy is absolutely unique.

Worldly happiness is when my circumstances are in the right place. When things are going well. But when they're not, I'm not happy. Christian joy is something different.

It's not positive psychology. It comes from God himself. It comes from recognizing my own lostness. That I don't deserve his grace and his kindness and his mercy.

[4 : 12] But he continues to love me and to shower me and to welcome me and to embrace me with kindness and goodness. It's interesting that the Bible never looks down on the search for happiness.

It says to us that we give up too easily. That we're too easily satisfied with trinkets, toys and treasures and temporary pleasure. This is the point of the wonderful biography by Oxford professor C.S. Lewis.

It's called Surprised by Joy. If you haven't read it, it's a joy for you to read. It's how he passed from atheism to Christianity. And even in boyhood, he longed for joy.

And that's not just pleasure. He meant the experience of transcendent. Getting a glimpse of the beauty of eternity. So in the last years of high school, he discovered Icelandic saga.

So he learned Icelandic and read them all. He was a bit of a freak, really, in terms of his brains. Very clever man. Then he turned to Nordic myths, loved those, and Eastern religions and Aristotelian ethics.

[5 : 24] But it was when at university he began to read Christians, whom he had despised, that he writes this. I did not know what I was letting myself in for.

A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful about his reading. Then he says, You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted, even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.

That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929, I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed, perhaps that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing, the divine humility that will accept a convert even on such terms. The prodigal son at least walked home on his own.

But who can duly adore the love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?

[6 : 51] I think Surprised by Joy would be a great title for this parable. It's the story of a father with two sons and both sons are lost and both are dead for very different reasons.

And the father tries to bring both sons back into his joy. So let's look at the two sons together. The first is the youngest son who pursues happiness in all the wrong places.

Here is a wealthy father in verse 11 who has two sons. And the youngest son has come to this conclusion, that his real happiness will only take place under one condition.

He has to break away from the father. He has to declare his independence and move away and find his autonomy and make his own decisions about how he lives. It's the picture of how we think about God.

The basic lie of Satan, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, is that the only way I can find my true identity and my true joy is to have a kind of a declaration of independence from God, to run my life in my way.

[7 : 55] So that the fundamental sin is not adultery or lying or violence or hatred. It's that we're made by God, but we seek to be rid of God and to create our own meaning apart from him.

So in verse 12, the youngest son does what is completely unthinkable in that culture. He goes to his father and he demands his inheritance. Now it's difficult to underline the violation of community and family here.

In those days, saying to your father, I want the inheritance, is the equivalent of saying, Dad, I want you dead now. And he breaks fellowship with his father and his family in his village.

He says to his father, I want your things. I don't want you. So the father doesn't beat him and doesn't shame him, but allows him, because the father knows that you can't force love.

And with a heavy heart, he cashes in the property. And the young man heads off as fast as he can in his new Lamborghini SUV, goes to a far country to spend it on pleasure, prostitutes and parties.

[9 : 09] And of course, the great irony is that every cent he spends on parties has been given to him by his father as a gift. He didn't earn it. He's actually using his father's gifts to gain independence from the father.

And all the so-called happiness that he has ought to remind him where it comes from, but it doesn't. And it doesn't take long for him to burn through his father's money and famine hits the land.

And he finds himself working in a pigsty, wishing he could eat the food of the pigs. And it's in the pigsty he makes a realization. He says, the servants back who work for my father, they have plenty to eat.

And so he comes up with a deal, with a negotiation in verse 18. If you look down at it, he says, I'll go to my father. I'll say, here is a three-part deal. One, I've sinned against heaven and before you. Very good sounding words. Two, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. I'll give over that status. Three, treat me as one of your hired servants. It is a transaction.

[10:13] He's given up the idea of the privilege of being a son. I'm going to work as a servant and perhaps I'll pay back some of this mess and climb my way out of it. It's not repentance.

It's remorse. It's regret. He's not dealing with the alienation of the father. He's dealing with the consequences of his own sin. He just wants to save his own skin.

But when the father appears, we begin to see what the real issue is in verse 20. While the son is a long way off, his father saw him, felt compassion, ran and embraced and kicked him.

Sorry, kissed him. Didn't kick him. He should have kicked him. Sorry, I just need to, just need to, just need to change, just change that word.

Sorry about that. Oh dear. I'm glad you're awake now. So what do we make of this idea of the father running this distance?

[11:22] I think it's probably because the father knows that the son will be mocked and humiliated by the village because he's humiliated his father. And so the father runs the gauntlet for him.

Because what's really important to the father is his son. You know, how did he see him? How long has he been waiting and longing and watching for this son? These are the actions of a father who couldn't care less about the money, but he cares about the son.

And it's wonderful. The son breaks into his three-part deal speech, but the father cuts him off when he gets to point two. You see that in verse 21. And the son said to him, point one, father, I've sinned against heaven and before you.

Point two, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But before he gets point three out, the father said to the servants, quickly, bring 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. Let us eat. And here is this big word. Celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost as is found. And they began to celebrate. Now, the youngest son is not a hero for going away and coming back.

[12:32] There are some commentaries that say that. His motive for coming home is his empty tummy. But from the father's point of view, that's absolutely fine.

Because none of us ever have ever really wanted God for the right reasons. What drives us back to God so often is starvation. But the father makes clear it's not a negotiation.

He comes back wanting to be a servant, but the father receives him as son with lavish acceptance and blessing. None of this transactional nonsense. And it's a picture of amazing grace.

And it's told by Jesus himself, who left heaven to come and seek and save the lost. He's come to show that God receives sinners.

And it is Jesus' purpose to bring us into the presence of God, into his eternal joy, so that they begin to celebrate. And then we move secondly to the eldest son.

[13:32] So if the youngest son is seeking for happiness in the wrong place, the eldest son is pursuing happiness in the wrong way. And here's the thing, the kicker in the story. The older brother is just as alienated from the father as the younger was.

The younger brother didn't really want the father. He just wanted his things. And he did that by going far away. The older brother also doesn't really want the father. He just wants his father's things.

But he's done it by staying at home and being a good boy. So you see, there are two completely different ways to be lost from God. One is the way of rejection and immorality, running away from God, breaking the rules.

And the other is a slow estrangement from the father by a life of uprightness and morality. The older brother is one who keeps the rules and stays in the father's house.

And at the end of the story, it's the younger brother who comes back and is saved. But the older brother, who is the good one and the moral one, remains lost. Not despite his goodness, but precisely because of it.

[14 : 38] So in verse 25, the older brother comes in from the field. He hears the music and the dancing and he grabs the servant. He says, what is the meaning of this? And 27, servant says, your brother has come.

Your father has killed the fattened calf because he's received him back safe and sound, breathlessly. Older son, he was angry and refused to go in. Now, you can begin to see how far alienated he is from the heart of the father.

He can't even pretend to be happy. He can't even put on a forced grin. He just can't enter into the joy of the father. He resents this easy acceptance of the younger brother.

All this dancing, all this frivolity. And for the second time today, the second time in one day, the father goes out again and he speaks kindly to the older brother.

He doesn't have to do this. But this is what God is like. Because God loves the stale, self-righteous brother just as much as he loves the sinful, selfish brother.

[15 : 43] And the older brother's speech is very revealing. Verse 29, he says to the father, look, it's a pretty aggressive word.

Look, he says, these many years I have served you and I've never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me a goat, a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours came, who's devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. Now I think in our, in church land and in the world today, it's not difficult to tell who is a younger brother.

Younger brothers have no time for God. They're busy spending their energies on the West Coast lifestyle. They're using all the gifts God has given them without any reference to God to run away from God. And sometimes you find them in pigsties, you know, wealthy minimalist pigsties.

But it's much harder to tell the older brother. That's because the older brother is here in church. The older brother sits in pews and stands in pulpits and is on church committees.

[16 : 50] They are upright, good, giving, obeying the commandments. And there are, there are many more, but there are just three marks I want to point to of being an older brother here.

And the first is that his relation with God is transactional, not transformational. You see back there in that verse, I have never disobeyed you. I have served you these many years.

Implication, you owe me. If the younger brother thought when he came home he needed to negotiate to be received by the father, the older brother's whole connection with the father has become one long transaction.

You know, a transaction, you pay a certain amount, you get an agreed benefit. So you come to church and you live basically a good life and it's God's job to give you blessings and to make life go well.

Problem is, life doesn't always go well. A friend gets cancer and you pray like steam and they still die. And if you have a transactional relationship with God, you're either angry with God or angry with yourself.

[17 : 55] If you're angry with God, the way it shows is by grumbling and murmuring and you don't do it openly and explicitly but you have a sense that God is just not pulling his weight.

Come on God, I've done my part, you're not coming through for me. Or you're angry with yourself, perhaps I didn't have enough faith. I mean, I tried to do good things and to get God to answer my prayers.

I've been paying my tithe and praying really hard. I've even kept myself from sin this week. God has to bless me, right? But since he hasn't blessed me, somehow I've let him down. Faith is reduced to a deal.

God is reduced to a sort of ATM where you come and you get your cash and you just walk away. And this is in all of us. The older brother's relationship is basically using God for what he can give you.

So here's one way to tell. When an older brother prays to God, he's got a list of requests. I need this, I need this, I need this. Never spends time in adoration or worship or just meditating on the goodness of God and his love and his providence.

[19 : 02] But a transactional relationship can't transform us because you still hold the pretense of being in control. You're trying to control God by doing what is right and good, trying to put him in your debt.

That's the first mark. It's transactional. The second is that the older brother struggles with a sense of resentment and it follows very closely from the transactional relationship.

And this is where the fattened calf comes in. Research shows fattened calves were hugely expensive, could feed the whole village. And for the father to do this has taken it right out of the older brother's share of the estate which he's been working so hard to conserve and hoard. You hear the resentment. Verse 29, you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends but when this son of yours came back who's devoured your property with prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him.

It's a very specific form of anger, resentment. He's not distressed by the hurt experienced by the father from the younger brother.

[20 : 10] He's not concerned for the humiliation and pain the father suffered. This is something purely selfish. Since I've worked so hard and since I deserve God's blessing, I'm going to take it as a personal injury when I don't receive the best treatment.

It's just not fair, God, that you would receive this young bloke back with no consequences. When am I going to be recognised for all my work? And you look at your friends and their lives seem to be going better than yours.

You say, God, Lord, I'm doing my best here. But you're not keeping up your end of the bargain. Just throw me a goat sometime. And resentment colours everything in every relationship and it becomes harder and harder to keep up your end of the bargain if you're trying to be good because you get less out of less, less and less out of obeying God.

Do you know when the older brother says to his father, I've served you these many years, he uses the word for slave. I've slaved for you. It's the perfect giveaway.

He's not living, he's not doing this out of love for the father or to be like the father. There's no joy in this for him. It's just a slog. It's a chore. And the father's words to him are so tender, verse 31.

[21 : 30] He says, son, child, he says, you're always with me. All that's mine is yours. It's fitting. It's really great fun to celebrate and be glad.

For this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found. Again, the father doesn't berate him or beat him or even kick him. He just reminds him of their relationship.

We've been with each other and all that I've had is yours. And he doesn't apologise for the party.

Because he yearns for the older brother to come in.

But the older brother is in great danger. He's lived in the place of privilege. He's had daily access to the father who loves him and has given him everything he could possibly want.

A father who cares deeply for him. But in his heart, he takes the love of the father for granted. And he's replaced that love with a kind of a self-created slavery.

[22 : 30] And he's in great danger because he's become so used to the grind and so cynical about this relationship he finds it hard to imagine joy anymore. And that's the second mark of an older brother.

Resentment. And the third, which I found from someone else this week, the third mark of an older brother is superiority. He looks down on the younger brother.

I am not going to come into this party. I am not going to rejoice. And when he speaks to the father about his younger brother he doesn't say this my younger brother has come home.

He says this son of yours. Because if the relationship with God is based on hard work and performance you're always going to look down on those who don't work as hard as you.

They're lazy. You're always going to feel superior to people of other religions or other denominations and you gradually just lose touch with God and his heart. He loved the mercy and blessing of God for him but he hated it when God extended the grace and mercy to this younger brother.

[23 : 38] And he will not extend friendship to the younger brother. And I think we love it when God showers us with blessings and we don't like it when he showers others with blessings.

And we imagine that God has only got a certain amount of mercy to go around and the more that he gives to others the less he's got for us. But what matters to his father are his sons.

And he will give anything that they enter into his joy that they be reconciled with him and know the security of his love and his grace because God receives sinners.

He loves the younger brother who was lost. The younger brother who knew when he was starving and had nothing to give. He says to the younger brother and every younger brother, come home.

Here's the ring. Here's the robe. Here's the feast. I love you. And he kindly urges every old brother and he says all that is mine is yours. Put away your transaction and your resentment and your grumbling.

[24 : 43] I'm the God who raises the dead and gives life to the lost. And we have to see before we leave this, who is telling this story? And it's Jesus Christ, the son of God who came from heaven, as I said, to seek and save the lost.

All the lost. Doesn't matter whether we're like the younger brother or the older brother. Whether you've run from God or whether you feel superior to others. Christ has come from heaven to show how far from the father we are.

And he dies to show us, to bring us back to the father and to show us how much God loves us. And I don't think we can read this this morning without examining our hearts.

Come back to God. Whether you're still in the far country and feel like you've made a pig stive your life and you're trying to do a deal with God, or whether you've lived safely all your life with access to God, but you've lost your joy because the relationship has just become a transaction, God is calling people on both sides and all the way on that continuum to repent and come home to him.

Repent of seeking happiness apart from him. Repent of seeking happiness in a transaction with him. Come back to him and enter into his joy. Because when we come back to God, Jesus says, that's not the end of the story.

[26 : 02] It's the beginning of a new life and it leads to this celebration, this joy of being in the presence of God. And I think what that means for us as a church is this, that if Christ is in our midst, there ought to be a sense of welcome and joy.

It ought to be a place where younger brothers are welcomed and we delight in the rescue from being lost. And where older brothers increasingly come to recognize the privilege that they have of living in the Father's house, where there's just a general astonishment at the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And my question for us is, how are we doing? Wouldn't it be good if today, after church, as you spoke to others, you asked each other or were honest with each other about how we're doing in this?

And if we need help, we should pray together. So let's kneel and pray.