

The Fulfilling God

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: 26 May 2019

Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 00] Good morning to you. Thanks for those of you who filled in. I was unable to say good morning to you this morning, so not to draw attention to you and point you out.

And you've come at the perfect time. The rest of the service is important too. And if you want to know just how important that is, Jeff Greenman gave just a beautiful teaching at Learner's Exchange on Anglican Liturgy, part one, and there will be a part two.

I hope you turn up for part two, and that probably comes in the fall, but part one you can listen to online about this, yeah, I think this majestic service that we have magnifies the Lord.

So that's why we're here today, and that's why we listen to God's word and the gospel purely preached, that he might maybe not become real to us, because he already is, but we realize just how great and gracious and good he is.

And we're continuing on this sermon series, which is called Life Explored, based on some materials that are used in a small group format that St. John's will use in the fall.

[1 : 20] And we're just preparing our congregation for an evangelistic effort, I guess, by preaching through this series, and also the small groups are using them now too to prepare for that in the fall.

And the first sermon was on the generous God. Let me just refresh your memory on that. I won't do it for all of the sermons that we've heard so far, but that was just about God not being a demanding God, as he's thought of sometimes, though he does place demands on us, but a God who's full of promise.

And that points us in the direction of our God, who's a covenantal God, to whom we belong because of the promises that he's issued and he's good to deliver on. We know that we live in a world where there are lots of promises made, even you and I make promises that we don't fulfill. But our Lord fulfills his promises, and ultimately through his Son and Savior, Jesus Christ. His death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, where he reigns, and those promises are ultimately fulfilled in him.

But there's promises that continue to be fulfilled day in and day out in our lives by his grace and his Holy Spirit. That was the first sermon. Second sermon, I won't go into, but the last one you heard was the liberating God.

[2 : 32] That was last week. And maybe you still remember that, but the reference points for that were Exodus chapter 3. And then we were back in Matthew chapter 11, learning about our Father and how he frees us from our sins through forgiveness, that also frees us up for service in his kingdom because he's given rest to our souls.

And it's out of that rest that he gives to us that we then go on to serve him and worship and witness in the world in which we live. God fulfills his promises to us in that way.

Today's sermon title is The Fulfilling God. You may not immediately think that when you heard the second lesson, which is the text for the sermon today. But we're going to turn to that now and have a look at why this really familiar parable represents to us the God of fulfillment or the fulfilling God. So let me ask you this question. When you think of God, what kind of image comes to your mind? Now, I'm not thinking of a grave and forbidden or prohibited in the second commandment. Not an image shaped by our hands with material like the gods of other religions. I'm thinking of ones that are revealed to you through scripture.

[3 : 51] When you think of God, what kind of image comes to your mind? Is the image one of a king or creator? A father or a son? A shepherd or a master?

A servant or a savior? A lord or a lover? A teacher or a healer? Today's reading is commonly known as the parable, you know this, of the prodigal son.

Some of us have suggested that we call this actually the prodigal sons. And another has actually suggested it be called the prodigal God. The former is to focus attention on the son or sons. The latter, of course, to focus on the father. Or do you think this parable is more about the father or the son or sons? Now, whatever you think, the parable presents God to us in the likeness of a father.

And this is a safe representation given the first person of the Trinity is the father. The second, the word father rolls off your tongue, though the implication is that it is of a relationship between a father and a child.

[5 : 04] I think it's easy to lose sight, though, of the father in this parable and focus on the son or sons, which is often the case. And I'm going to do a little bit of that. But even if the story begins with Jesus addressing the Pharisees and scribes, so just look down at your Bible.

If it's not open, you might want to open it to page 874. And while you're turning to that, because you'll need it later, I'll read to you the way this actually begins. Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them. Well, that's the Pharisees and scribes learn here.

It's about Jesus and who he's associating with, fraternizing with, as it were. Well, God is our father, like a shepherd and a woman who seek that which is lost.

Those are the two parables that actually precede this third one. They come in a trilogy, as it were. The parable of the seeking father and lost sons follows, then, that of these two previous parables.

[6 : 07] The big theme is, of course, the God who saves those who are lost. And we heard a sermon not that long ago, actually, this theme of and ending with, that Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost.

That was in chapter 15. Actually, back in chapter 9, Jesus calls his disciples to follow him. And he says that if you will follow me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

If you seek to save your life, you will lose it. But if you lose it for my sake, you will actually find it. This theme of lost is a big one in terms of discipleship.

This parable shows us that we can be lost from our Father in heaven, went a long way from him or even close by. The parable is not commending either position or proximity of God, though.

There is a real spiritual danger in either situation of being close or far from him, one as much as the other. One son is all about desire, and the other one seems to be all about duty.

[7 : 15] Interestingly, desire and duty are not all that bad, but not all that good either. Just crack open your prayer book again, where we started with Psalm 107, but then also we read 42.

On page 383, it begins like this. Like as the heart desireth the water brooks, so my soul longeth after thee, O God.

Did you see that word desireth? Desiring for the right things is actually a good thing. But desire spells sin when disconnected from the Father's good pleasure, and duty also spells sin when disconnected from the Father's good provision.

The Father has both good desires and good duties for us, but to enjoy and exercise by his grace. Both sons in the story are turned away from their Father, and turned towards themselves, or even tuned toward themselves, inwardly focusing on themselves again and again.

Instead of outwardly focused on the Father's goodness, beauty, and truth, it seems to be all about them. So let's look briefly at these two sons. First, the second, or the youngest son.

[8 : 37] There's a birth order here. Young sons and daughters are generally thought rebellious and careless. I should know. I'm actually one of them. They're the invincible, or the little ones.

This son fits the stereotype. He takes the money and he runs, though not stolen, just squandered, in the pursuit of pleasure, leaving him homeless and hopeless.

He has no one to blame but himself, and the fact of the matter is that he actually knows that. Still motivated by pleasure, he, the text tells us, came to himself, and not to be confused with repentance, though.

He figures, this is his motivation, that he can have it better as a servant in his Father's home, back where he came from, rather than where he's at right now. Granted, though, he does recognize his sin against his Father, and practice this kind of as a mantra before he's going to come and see his Father so he can say the right words to him.

That's the first son in this, who is the youngest son. But actually, the first and the oldest son is actually second, then. The older sons and daughters are generally thought excelling and achieving, the responsible and the big ones.

[9 : 54] I have one of those. It's my older brother. This son fits the stereotype, too. He stays close to home, failing to appreciate how good he has it and all the good he's got.

Life in the Father's household is about the good, the beautiful, the true. It is work that's actually prepared for us in advance by him, which is as much delight as it is duty.

This work is fulfilling, by contrast, to the pigsty of the younger brothers. Apparently, the first and oldest son, though, doesn't get it.

He hasn't come to himself like his younger brother, or he hasn't come to the father, for that matter, either, even though he's standing right next to him. He's inwardly focused on what he's doing and doesn't have right in front of his very own eyes and at his very own hands and fingertips.

It doesn't get any better, but the oldest son just doesn't know it. Now let's turn to the father. The father is gracious like no one else, literally no one else that we've ever known in all of our life.

[11 : 06] Not even our own fathers can be quite this gracious. The father's grace is demonstrated with the youngest son in providing what he does not deserve. The son is working on the premise, ask and you will receive.

He gets what he has coming to him long before he's even able to receive it. Look out for what you ask for. You might just get it. And the youngest son gets what he has coming to him, but long before he's ready for it.

He doesn't even deserve it. Inheritance and grace is like that. The relationship is the reason for the provision of property that's divided actually between the two sons and distributed evenly between them.

The father just provides and generally shows grace to the youngest undeserving son, but also to the youngest at that point as well. The father, of course you know, does the same with you and me. The father's grace is also demonstrated with the oldest son in not only property, but also presence. The operative word here is actually presence.

[12 : 17] When the oldest son sees the mercy and grace, the father then sheds upon pleasure pursuing promiscuous brother, he lodges a valid complaint. The oldest brother is angry and clear about his own righteousness through service, the text tells us, and obedience.

He never bothers to question his own motives, but convinced his father's got it all wrong. The father isn't really interested in motives either.

He is, however, interested in relationship. He graciously entreats and retorts the older alienated son in verse 31. You can look down if you wish.

Saying this to him, Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. Let me say this again. Presence with the father is everything.

Now that's what he's saying. Son, you are always with me. And these possessions, they're the possession of God's blessing, but presence is everything.

[13 : 25] To be filled with the fullness, this is the fulfilling God, is the greatest gift of the father's grace. His presence with us. Let me kind of turn to another text in the Bible now that wasn't read this morning.

And that is with the apostle Paul. Paul drives this point home in his letter to the church in Ephesus. You might want to turn there with me.

Ephesians chapter 3 on page 977. He gives the church two prayers. He gives one at the beginning in chapter 1. He gives one at the end of chapter 3.

The second one is in praise of a petition to the father like that in today's story or parable. The apostle begins by addressing God in these words.

For this reason, I bow my knees before the father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. But he finishes the prayer later with this petition.

[14 : 29] That he wants us to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. This is the theme of the fullness of the father.

And this is what the father wants for his children, his sons, his daughters, his whole family. He longs to fill his sons and daughters with his own son's fullness and presence forever.

Now friends, God is really, really with us. And it brings great delight and joy to him and his household when we receive his fullness as he has it for us through his grace.

That's why we read Habakkuk. I've got you flipping a lot this morning. It's just a plan, a strategy to keep you awake. If you have a hard time, if you're wondering actually about why we chose Habakkuk, the last three verses of three chapters, which might make...

Just see how this goes then. It speaks of the joy of God. Verse 18, Yet will I rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

[15 : 47] And it continues on in there in the way that we actually express that. But all three of these parables, the parable of the lost sheep that is found by the good shepherd, the mother, the woman who actually finds the lost coin, and the father who has the two lost sons.

They all have this element, this sense of joy in them. We know that at the baptism of our Lord, the words were spoke, This is my son in whom I take great delight. The father's presence over the son with the Holy Spirit coming down says these words in whom I take great delight.

And here's the father in this picture of the lost sons who's taking great delight along with the rest of his household who's full of joy at the one who's actually repented, the one who was lost, but now who is found.

We don't have to go and be lost to bring that kind of joy to the Lord. The joy of the Lord is always there for us with his presence. And friends, this makes all the difference in this world and the next. Both sons in this peril think about what they do not have and want. And we're not all that different. We may not have people or things or services that we long to have, but the father has given us gracious and beautiful and true gifts us and has not withheld his son.

[17 : 13] And most importantly in that, he's actually given us himself. And all the fullness of the earth, which is his to give, comes to us through his son, our savior, Jesus Christ, in whom our Lord's promises are ultimately and always fulfilled.

He is the fulfilling father. And I speak to you in the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.