

Luke 15:11-31

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[0 : 00] So, we're in week four of our five-week series in the Gospel of Luke, and let me give you a brief refresher. In week one, we discovered that Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

Memory verse. In week two, we said, how does Jesus seek and save? And we looked at forgiveness. In week three, we looked at what is the response of the one who experiences forgiveness?

And we discovered that great forgiveness produces great love. And now in week four, we are looking at a different sort of response. We're looking at the older son and the parable of the prodigal sons, and we're looking at the response of the one who is self-righteous.

Now, what Mark or Dr. Luke did a good job of telling us is how Jesus told this parable in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes. And that is why I think Jesus ends the parable by looking at the older son, because he wants the scribes and the Pharisees to identify with the older son and come to a deeper understanding of his grace.

So, in the parable, we discover that there are essentially two ways to be lost. The first is a form of practical atheism. It's the younger son, living as if God doesn't exist, lawless, irreligious, self-indulgent.

[1 : 19] But the other way of being lost, which is the older son, is a very, very religious way of being lost. It's outwardly respectable and faithful, but inwardly it's grumpy and hard-hearted and self-righteous.

So, the older brother in the parable teaches us that one of the biggest hindrances to living and maturing in the Christian faith is an attitude that can actually be learned easily and encouraged in the community of faith.

It's a self-righteousness that denies our own lostness. So, this parable, in other words, is for the person who is a faithful servant of the Lord.

This parable is for the person who has been obedient servant of the Lord for many years. They've read their Bible, they've prayed their prayers, they've served the church, but they have become desensitized to their own lostness and need for God's grace.

And so, this precarious spiritual attitude is revealed in this parable in two ways. First, in the older son's response to his younger brother's redemption, and in the older son's response to his father's compassion.

[2 : 29] So, notice how in verse 28, to the younger brother, he responds with anger and refuses to join the celebration of his redemption.

And this is exactly the opposite of the way in which the father responded to the younger brother, which was with compassion. And then notice in verses 29 and 30, how he responds to his father by complaining about the situation, both about his younger brother and the way the father responds.

In other words, he adopts exactly the opposite attitude of the younger son, who instead of complaining, confesses to his father. So, the parable ends with this open-ended question, how will the older son respond to his father's extravagant and persistent outpouring of love?

See, both sons broke the father's heart. Both sons rebelled and rejected their family. Both sons are lost. There is only one real difference between the two sons in this parable.

It's in their response to the unexpected and undeserved love of the father. Each person must decide what their response will be. And the parable ends open-ended because we, the readers, are left with the question, how will you respond?

[3 : 45] So, in this parable, we see Jesus trying to help the Pharisees and the scribes and us toward a deeper and a truer and a fuller experience of the father's unmerited love.

And in so doing, Jesus exposes the inner dynamics of the self-righteous heart, the self-righteous person. He shows us how self-righteousness works, what it looks like in our lives, and where help and healing and hope is to be found.

So, how does self-righteousness work? The difference here is described to us as a difference between humble sinners and hypocritical saints. So, humble sinners want to be the objects of the father's love, want to be the objects of God's love, but they know that they cannot be its basis.

And hypocritical saints want to be the objects of God's love, and they also think that they are the basis of his love. So, let me explain that. I'm splitting hairs here, but it's an important one.

Both sons in the parable want to be the object of God's love and blessing. Both want to be at home, and they want to feel the privilege and the esteem of being in their father's house.

[4 : 56] But the significant difference between both of them is that the younger son knows he is unworthy to be a son in his father's house. He knows that the way he has acted and what he has done means he cannot be the basis of his father's love.

In fact, he comes in humility and great shame over his rejection of the father and his squandering of the father's wealth. The older son, on the other hand, thinks he is worthy of the father's love in some sense.

He definitely thinks he's more worthy than his younger brother, in verse 30. He never left the father. He never turned his back on the father. And he thinks that his years of faithful servants and his years of diligent obedience to the father's voice should be the basis for the father's love and blessing and esteem of him.

So both sons want the father's love. One thinks he is worthy of it, and the other doesn't. So what's the point? The dynamics of self-righteousness flourish and thrive in our hearts and minds, in our communities and churches, when we have misunderstood the nature of God's love and grace.

When we think that the father's love and grace is somehow a response to our own faithfulness, as opposed to our faithfulness being a response to his love and grace. And this is very important for us to understand.

[6 : 17] I know I'm kind of digging deep here a little bit, but this is really important for us to understand. Because our sense of self is defined by the love and the approval that we receive from others, and the basis of that love.

If I am somehow the basis of the love and the approval that I receive, so like what I do and what I think and how I perform and what I achieve, if I am the basis of the love that I receive, then deep down we have a sneaking suspicion that that love will never last.

Because when God finds out, or others find out, who I really am, how fallen and fragile and fickle I really am, then I will lose the love for which I so deeply long.

If something in us is the basis of our being loved. But in the economy of God's grace, this is not so. Here we are told that God alone is the basis of his love for us, that his love is uncreated and it's uncaused by anything outside himself, that he chooses, he chooses to make us his sons and daughters, the sons and daughters of his tender affection.

And the basis of his love for us lies not in us. And for that reason, it is stable and secure and persistent and consistent in a way that no other earthly love is.

[7 : 42] It's something we can really trust in and rest our lives upon. So, how does self-righteousness work? What is being revealed to us about the inner dynamics of self-righteousness in the older son?

It's that self-righteousness feeds off a misunderstanding of God's love and his grace. Which leads us to the second question. How does it look in our lives?

What ways does this inner dynamic bubble up to the surface? And Luke 15 gives us a few different hints here. In verse 2, we start grumbling about others.

Murmuring or muttering, whether in private or public, they get what I want or what I wish I had. They don't deserve it. I deserve it more. And we just start distancing ourselves from others by form of grumbling.

When I was in Southern California in the middle of COVID and the 2020 election, I had many grievous conversations with people in my congregation where from the right, somebody would say to me, I can't understand how somebody can be a Democrat and a Christian.

[8 : 48] I can't be a part of this church anymore because I can't be a part of a church that has Democrats in it. And then I would have a conversation the next day with somebody on the left who would be like, I can't understand how somebody can be a Republican and be a Christian right now.

I can't be a part of this church anymore. I'm leaving because I don't want to be a part of a church where people say they're Christians and they're Republicans. We start grumbling about other people.

And in verse 28, we see that sometimes this grumbling can actually be a sign of anger at God. You, God, are not treating me fairly compared to others.

And then we see is that when this anger settles in, it can become resentfulness and bitterness and cynicism. Verse 28, refusing to celebrate the kindness of God towards other people.

And we would rather choose missing out on the joy of those who are celebrating God's grace than admitting that maybe we're in the wrong ourselves. So we see grumbling and anger and refusing are the ways in which self-righteousness kind of bubbles up to the surface.

[9 : 54] And a simple question we could ask ourselves is, in what way do I identify with any of these experiences right now at this season of my life? Have I noticed in my own life a heart of grumbling or a spirit of discontent?

Where and when has this bubbled up? Have I considered that maybe this is a sign of anger towards God in some way? A feeling of being mistreated or not given what I deserve or let down?

And have I considered if this anger might be underneath my struggle to actually celebrate the kindness of God towards other people? See, we all go through seasons, sometimes a whole lifetime, where this is our difficulty and affliction.

So it leads us to our final question. Where is hope and healing and help to be found? For the self-righteous person. Let me tell the kids that they have a few-minute warning, and then we'll get to that question.

Hey, kiddos. We've got about three minutes left. Is that going to be enough time? You all feel okay about that? All right. I'll take no response as a good response.

[11 : 12] In three minutes, I'll ask some of you to share some of your pictures. It'll be good. Where is hope and healing to be found? I think maybe a better way to phrase the question is, how does the Father respond to our self-righteous hearts and attitudes?

The answer that we discover here is, He rebuilds our relationship to Him on a different foundation than the one we've built and constructed. So not the foundation we've chosen, which is a foundation of obligation and debt, but a foundation He has chosen for us, of family affiliation and affection and belonging.

Look in verse 31 to 32. He says to the older son who has just complained to him, who has grumbled in the anger and discontent of his heart, and he responds to him by saying, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

The first way the Father responds is He addresses us as sons and daughters. He affirms that even in our self-righteousness, we belong to Him and His family, and He is trying to draw us out of this servant mindset that we have gotten ourselves into.

See, self-righteousness is the sin that is most contagious amongst those who are most serious about serving the Lord. It's the keeners who tend to fall into the trap.

[12 : 44] And that's why Jesus says to the keeners, Get out of this servant-master-debt-obligation mindset. I'm trying to bring you into something much deeper and much closer and much richer. Sonship and daughtership is a divine gift of love.

Not something that can be earned or manipulated. Because it is something that is rooted in the Father's orientation towards us, not in what we can do or what we have done for Him.

Our relationship is rooted in God, not us. And then the Father goes on, and He reaffirms the blessings of having this sonship in Christ.

He says in verse 31, You are always with me. It's the blessing of closeness and presence and intimacy and access. And then He says, And all that is mine is yours.

So I'm inviting you into this commonwealth of life and love. I mean, how staggering is that? God is saying all that belongs to His life of love and grace now belongs to you.

[13 : 46] And then in verse 32, the Father reiterates that the only fitting way to respond to grace is joy. Just simple, unbridled, unfettered, letting everything go joy.

In verse 7, the parable ends, Joy in heaven over one sheep found. In verse 10, the parable ends, Joy before the angels of God over one coin found.

In verse 32, Joy in the household of God over one son who returns. And so we discover that joy is the nearest cousin of grace, just as grumbling is the nearest cousin of self-righteousness.

So I think there's something to Jonathan Edwards' claim, that true religion very much consists in godly affections. What we discover is that no affection is more like God than joy over the return of a lost sinner.

And joy is the rest and contentment that we find in our object of love. In this case, it's the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

[14 : 58] It's the one who came to seek and save the lost. And it's the one who invites us to share his joy whenever the lost are found. My brothers and sisters, this is the good news of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ for us today.

Amen.