

Luke 15:11-31 (PM)

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[0 : 00] We are in week four of a five-week series in the Gospel of Luke. Let me give you a little refresher of what those four weeks have included. In week one, we discovered that Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

That's our memory verse. Week two, we asked the question, how does Jesus save? And we looked at forgiveness, the forgiveness of sins. Week three, we looked at the response of the one who experiences this forgiveness of Jesus.

And we learned that great forgiveness produces great love. And now in week four, we are looking at another response to God's grace or forgiveness. But it's the opposite of love.

It's self-righteousness. As the story unfolds, the parable of the prodigal son is told by Jesus to scribes and Pharisees who are grumbling over the fact that Jesus is eating with sinners.

And he tells the parable in such a way that it ends with this figure of the older son. Because he wants the scribes and the Pharisees to identify with this older son and learn something from him. And so, something that Jesus does that's really fascinating is he doesn't just say that there's one lost son.

[1 : 10] He actually paints the picture of two different ways of being lost. The first is the younger son. And he's what we could call a form of practical atheism. He lives as if God doesn't exist.

He's just lawless, irreligious, self-indulgent, carefree. And the other one, though, is still very lost. The older son. But it's a very different form of being lost.

It's a very religious form of being lost. It's outwardly respectable and faithful and commendable. But inwardly grumpy, 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 encouraged and learned in the community of faith.

Self-righteousness. In other words, a self-righteousness that denies our own lostness. So, I think this parable is very helpful for us. Because it's a parable for the person who has been faithful and obedient to the Lord for many years.

It's a parable for a person who's read their Bibles, prayed their prayers, and served their church. But, in the process, they have lost any sense of themselves being lost.

[2 : 23] They have become desensitized. So, as we get into the story, we realize that this precarious spiritual attitude that can seep into any human heart is revealed in two ways.

First, the older son's response to his brother's redemption. And then, number two, the older son's response to his father's compassion. So, to his brother's redemption, he responds with anger, and he refuses to join the celebration that his younger brother has been found.

And in doing that, he actually has the exact opposite response that the father has to the younger brother when he returns, which is one of compassion. And, the older brother also responds to his father's compassion with complaint.

Meaning, he adopts the exact opposite attitude of his younger brother towards the father, which is confession. So, when the father responds to the younger son with compassion, the older brother responds with anger and refusal to celebrate.

And when the younger son responds to the father with confession, the older son responds with complaint. So, the parable ends with this open-ended question.

[3 : 34] How will the older son respond to his father's extravagant and persistent outpouring of love? It's a question that's pointed to every one of us.

Because both sons broke their father's heart. Both sons rebelled and rejected their family. Both sons are lost. But there's only one real difference between the two sons in this story.

It's their response to the unexpected and undeserved love of the father is different. So, each person, we're told at the end of the parable, must decide for themselves what their response will be.

How will the older son respond? How will I respond? How will you respond? How will I respond? So, in this parable, just to recap, Jesus is trying to help the scribes and the Pharisees and trying to help us toward a deeper and truer and fuller embrace of the father's unmerited love.

And in doing that, Jesus exposes the hidden dynamics of self-righteousness that are so often at work in our lives. He exposes how it works. He exposes what it looks like in our lives.

[4 : 42] And he exposes where help and healing is to be found. So, first, how does it work? What are the dynamics of this self-righteousness? See, the main difference between humble sinners, i.e. the younger son, and hypocritical saints, i.e. the older son, is that humble sinners want to be the object of God's love, but not its basis.

This is going to get intense for a second, but I'll explain it. Hypocritical saints want to be the object of God's love and its basis. Object of love and basis.

Let me explain. Both sons in the parable want to be the object of the father's love and blessing. They both want to be at home and privileged and esteemed in their father's house. But there's a significant difference between them.

It's that the younger son knows he is unworthy to be called the father's son anymore. We see this in verse 19. He knows he cannot be the basis of his father's love. What he has done and what he has said and what he has thought is not worthy of his father's affection and love.

And so he comes to him saying, I'm not worthy to be called your son. Just take me back as a servant. He feels great shame over his rejection of his father and the squandering of his wealth.

[5 : 56] And so he wants his father's love and he comes back and confesses, but he knows that he cannot be the basis of that love. He's not worthy. But the older son, on the other hand, he believes he's worthy in some sense of the word.

We see it in verse 29. And then in verse 30, he definitely thinks he's more worthy than his younger brother. He never left the father. He never turned his back on the father.

And he thinks that his years of faithful service and diligent obedience to the father should be rewarded in some way. It should be the basis of the father's love and blessing and celebration of him.

So what we discover is that both sons want the father's love. One thinks he's worthy and the other doesn't. So, what's the point of all this?

The point is this. The dynamics of self-righteousness flourish and thrive. In our hearts and minds, in our communities and churches, when we misunderstand the nature of God's love and grace towards us.

[7 : 06] When we think that the father's grace is somehow a response to our faithfulness instead of our faithfulness being a response to his love and grace. And this is very important for us to understand.

Because our sense of self, in other words, our identity, is defined by the love and approval that we receive from others. And the basis of that love. If I am somehow the basis of the love that I receive from God or other people.

So like what I do or what I say or what I think or my creativity. Then I have a sneaking suspicion that that love can be easily lost. Why? Because if God or others find out who I really am.

My fallen, fragile, fickle self. Then I'm worried that I will lose the love for which I so deeply long. If that love is rooted in something in me.

But in the economy of God's grace, we discover in this parable, this is not so. God alone is the basis of his love for us. He is the uncreated and uncaused basis of love for us.

[8 : 16] He chooses to make us his sons and daughters. The sons and daughters of his affection. And so the basis of his love for us lies not in us, but with him. And that means that even as my life fluctuates.

Even as my feelings fluctuate. Even as my experiences and emotions come and go. God's love is stable and secure and persistent and consistent in a way that no other earthly love is.

Because it is rooted in God and not me. It is something that I can really trust and rest my life upon. So what is it that is being revealed about the dynamics of self-righteousness in this parable of the older son?

It's that self-righteousness feeds off a misunderstanding of the basis of God's love and grace towards us. And that leads us to our second question.

Is what does it actually look like in our lives? How does that inner dynamic bubble to the surface in concrete ways? In Luke 15, I think we're given three little hints. Verse 2, Jesus is addressing the scribes and Pharisees who are grumbling about others.

[9 : 27] Grumbling is the first thing that shows up. That word means murmuring or muttering. Either silently under your breath, like in a public setting or very verbally in private.

This sense that I did not get what I want or wish. And they got something that I wish I had and they don't deserve it or I deserve it more.

And this grumbling can uproot in our hearts and it can cause divisions in the community of Christ. So when I was a pastor in Southern California during the 2020 election in the States, which was an intense time to be a pastor there, I had all these really difficult pastoral conversations with people who on the right were coming to me and saying, I don't understand how anybody that's a Democrat can be a Christian and say they follow Jesus.

I'm leaving this church. I don't want to be a part of a church with Democrats anymore. And then I would get people on the left who are coming to me saying, I don't understand how anybody can be a Republican right now and be a Christian.

And there are Republicans in this church and I don't want to be a part of this church, so I'm leaving. There is this grumbling in their hearts towards others. And when grumbling goes unchecked, sometimes it can actually turn into anger.

[10 : 43] Or grumbling can be a sign that anger is underneath. And in verse 28, we see that there's anger towards the Father. There's anger towards God is another way in which self-righteousness bubbles up.

God, you are not treating me fairly. And then in verse 28, the third bubbling up is refusing to celebrate God's kindness towards others.

Lord, I am resentful and I am bitter and I am cynical. And I will choose to stay that way instead of participate in the joy that you're offering me. Do you identify with these experiences, any one of them right now?

Grumbling, anger, or refusing? Have you noticed in yourself a grumbling heart or spirit in recent weeks?

Have you considered if this may be a latent sign of maybe anger at God? A deep feeling that he has not treated you fairly in comparison to other people?

[11 : 53] That he has not given you what you deserve or maybe he's let you down? And have you considered if this anger might be underneath your struggle to celebrate the kindness of God in other people's lives?

See, we all go through seasons, sometimes a whole lifetime, where this is our difficulty and affliction. And so it leads us to the final question. Where is hope and help and healing to be found?

A better way maybe to phrase this question is, how does the Father respond to our self-righteousness? And the lovely answer that we get in verses 31 and 32 is that the Father rebuilds our relationship to him on a different foundation than the foundation we've built on.

So it's not the foundation we've laid, which is the foundation of debt and obligation. But the Father rebuilds our relationship to him on a foundation of family, affiliation, and affection and belonging.

And we see this in his response to the older son in verse 31. He said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and he is alive.

[13 : 00] He was lost. Now he is found. The Father addresses us, even in our self-righteousness, as sons and daughters in his kingdom.

He affirms that we belong to him and his family, and he tries to draw us out of this servant mindset. Self-righteousness is the sin that's most contagious among those that are most serious about serving the Lord.

It's the keeners who tend to fall into this trap, and Jesus knows that. And that's why Jesus is drawing the keeners out of this mindset of viewing themselves in servant-master relationship.

And he wants them to draw them into something much closer and much deeper and much more intimate. Sonship is a gift of divine love. It is not something that can be earned or manipulated, because it is rooted in God's orientation towards us.

Not what we have done or what we have said or what we have thought, but in who God is, eternally and always. And that's why he goes on, the Father affirms the blessings of sonship that he is still offering to the older son and his self-righteousness.

[14 : 12] He says, son, you are always with me. It's the blessing of closeness and presence and intimacy and access. And then he says, son, all that is mine is yours.

Like, this isn't a zero-sum game. This is a commonwealth of life and love. I mean, think about the staggering claim that this is from the voice of Almighty God. All that belongs to the life of God now belongs to those who will turn to him and receive.

And then the Father reiterates that the only fitting way to respond to this offer is joy. Pure, unfettered, unbridled joy. To celebrate and be glad.

Each parable ends on this. The parable of the lost sheep. Heaven's joy over one sheep being found. The parable of the lost coin. Joy before the angels of God over that coin being found.

And the parable of the two lost sons. Joy in the household of God when one turns back to the Father. See, friends, joy is the nearest cousin to grace.

[15 : 20] Just as grumbling is the nearest cousin to self-righteousness. And there's something, I think, to that great evangelical revival preacher, Jonathan Edwards, claim that true religion does consist very much in godly affections.

And no affection is more like God than joy over the return of a lost sinner. Joy is the rest and contentment that we find in the object of our love.

And in this parable, the Father is the one who loved us and gave himself for us. His Son is the one who came to seek and save the lost. And his Spirit is the one who invites us to share joy whenever and wherever the lost are found.

My brothers and sisters, I speak this good news to you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.