

Generous Welcome

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Date: 06 August 2023

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you here this morning, and we're continuing in our series on a generous God, and we're considering his generous welcome this morning. Well, in chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel, there are three parables, the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the loving Father.

The context of the whole of chapter 15 concerns the attitude of the religious and the teachers of the law. What led to Jesus teaching these three parables is the complaint by the Pharisees that Jesus received sinners and ate with them.

If you go look at chapter 15, verse 2, if this man was the Messiah, they said, he would not keep close company with that kind of people. Jesus taught these three parables to correct their view on the character and nature of God's response to the lost and clarifies who really is lost.

The third story is our focus for today, famously known for centuries as the parable of the prodigal son. It's a story about a son who takes his father's inheritance, wastes it all, and then returns to a forgiving father.

But it's a great mistake to think that this is a story about just one son. It's actually a tale of two sons. It's a story about a younger brother, an elderly brother, and a loving father.

[1:29] We're meant to compare and contrast the brothers, and if we do, we see the radical message of a generous welcome Jesus leads us to. And this parable undermines the existing categories for understanding our relationship with God.

There's something else that's interesting about this story. Normally when we think of the formula for a story, there's three parts. You start off with the background information to build the story up, then you might introduce a problem or conflict, and at the end you have the resolution.

Well, Jesus doesn't follow the rules here. He actually starts with conflict. Right at the very beginning, there's some resolution of sorts, but not what we'd expect, and then we're left with no resolution, a real cliffhanger.

So let's begin with a speech at the start of Act 1. The younger son comes to the father, and he says, Father, give me my share of the estate.

So that's verse 12. That's rejection. You can follow along with the app as well if you've got that there. The original listeners would have been shocked at this request to share the estate.

[2:42] If you were a father and you had two sons and you died, your estate would have been divided. Two-thirds to the older son and one-third to the younger son because the older son in those days always received a double portion, and so the other child would just get the third.

But this would only happen when the father died. So when the younger son comes and says, Give me my share of the estate now, while the father is still alive, it's basically to wish the father was dead.

The younger son wants the father's things, but not the father. He wants his father's wealth and estate. He wants the comfort and the prestige and the independence that goes with those things. But he doesn't want the father. He wishes his father was dead. Now that's unheard of. But even more unheard of was the father's response to this request.

If the original listeners were astounded by the audacity of the son, they'd have even been more amazed at the father generously responding to what the younger son requested. Because as an ancient Middle Eastern father, he would have been expected to actually have driven that son out of the house, verbally, or even just beating him out of the stick and violent physical blows, sending him out of the town.

[4:05] Don't ever come back. How dare you? But the father doesn't do that. He shows generous grace. He divided the property between them. Now the Greek word used here is the word *bios*.

It means the course of life or that by which life is sustained. So the story really says the father divided his life between them.

Why does it say that? The father's estate was his land. His wealth was his land. So the only way he could give his son one third of the estate was to sell that land.

In those days, people's identity was bound up with their property and their land. If you lost your land, you lost yourself. If you lost part of your land, you lost community status, which was tied up with how much property you had.

So what the younger son is asking the father to do is this. He's asking his father to tear his life apart, to tear his standing in the community apart, to tear himself apart.

[5:13] And the father does. He divides the property between them, leaving him with two thirds of the estate. So the son takes his third, goes off, and squanders everything.

Everything he's been given. And he comes to the point where he's impoverished, where he's being taken advantage of, and his life is in absolute ruins. And when he's literally in the pigsty, in the mud, he comes to realise what a fool he's been.

He has time to self-reflect, and he has this light bulb moment. He comes up with a plan. The first part of the plan is to go home. Verses 18 there is repentance.

He says, in my father's house, there's bread to spare, and I'm starving here. I'll go and confess to my father, I have sinned.

I've sinned against heaven. I've sinned against you. So he'll go home. Now, this is simple, and yet it's actually quite profound. Home is not primarily a place.

[6:20] It's a relationship. It's where you belong. It's where you're accepted. And he longs to come home. But there's a second part to his plan. He says this, I'll go to the father, and I will say, Father, I'm not worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hired men. So this is not a request to become a slave. Slaves actually work on the estate, and slaves lived on the estate. Hired men lived in town, in the village, and had to come in and earn a wage.

What he's actually saying? What he wants to do is pay the father back. He knows that you can't come back into community where you've violated the morals and the code just through an apology. He wants to make restitution. So he's coming to the father, and he's saying, Father, I don't want to be reinstated as a son. I don't want the status of sonship.

I don't deserve it. I'm not worthy of it. I want to earn my way back. Make me like one of your hired men. I want to pay you back. That's the plan. So he heads home.

[7:30] And the father sees him coming from afar off. Now, if you're a parent, and you see your adult child coming, and this is someone who has harmed your family, and who has squandered a lot of your wealth, and you see them through your window as you're sitting at the kitchen table, you start tapping your foot, thinking, well, this better be good.

What could they possibly say that could rekindle my affection for them? How far are they going to grovel or to say they're sorry? That's not what happens.

That's not what the story says. The father, when he saw him from coming afar, had compassion on him. Love moved first.

The father runs towards him. An ancient Middle Eastern patriarchs did not run. Children ran. Youths ran. Women might even run. But not fathers that are owners of an estate.

That would mean picking up your tunic, bearing your legs, and you just didn't do that. It breached cultural protocol. It was undignified, and it was shameful. But his father runs.

[8:46] He shows complete emotional abandon, and he runs to his son, and the Greek word here, *kataphileo*, says, he fell on his neck and kissed him. You can just imagine, there's your child, embracing them, and burying your head in their neck, and kissing them, and no doubt sobbing.

The son tries to roll out his restitution plan, but the father will have nothing of it. He generously welcomes him home, saying, come, put a robe on him, put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet.

And the ring is significant. It was a signet ring, and it had the family seal on it. Back in those days, you didn't make a contract by signing something. You put the family seal from the signet ring on the contract.

So what's happening is this. The son is saying, I don't want to be brought back into the family. I want to earn my way back. But the father is saying, I'm not going to let you earn your way back.

I'm going to bring you back. By grace, he confers sonship on him, just like that, in one stroke. What a generous welcome.

[9:55] And he throws a magnificent feast to commemorate the day his lost son came home. It even says in the scriptures that angels will be feasting and partying when someone lost comes home.

Some people are like the younger brother. They want the things that God provides, but they don't want God. They want their independence. They want to live their lives the way they want to live them.

And they believe that it will bring them happiness. And some of them, like the younger son, come to their senses and decide to go home. Because the father in the parable represents God, we're being told nothing less than this.

No matter who you are, no matter how awful the stuff you've done, if you come home, God will accept you. He will love you.

What a generous welcome. All of us are like the younger son because when we first come to God, we say, I'm not worthy. I want to earn my way back.

[11:00] I want to try hard to make things right. And the biblical God will have none of it. His generous welcome is all about grace.

There's nothing we can do to make God love us more and there's nothing we can do to make God love us any less. How good is that news?

Grace is lavish. God accepts us, giving us full status as his children. He generously welcomes us by faith and faith alone. Jesus paid the restitution cost and on the cross, he ran to it and bore our shame.

So that in verse 12 of chapter 2 of the Psalms, kiss the son and find refuge in him. We were once lost, but we're now found.

We once were dead, but we're now alive. At the end of act one, everything appears to be back to normal. The conflict has been resolved. The younger son has been welcomed and forgiven by the father.

[12:08] The family is reunited, right? Not exactly. There's one character in this story we haven't met yet. He's not yet heard that the lost son has been found. Now almost always, when we think of this story, we only think about act one.

The younger son, he's coming home, the father's generous welcome. And as a result, almost everyone thinks of this story in the most sentimental terms. We imagine the original listeners hearing this marvellous story of forgiveness and their eyes welling up with tears.

But if you look at the context, the people Jesus was speaking to, the religious leaders, the teachers of the law, you'll see the purpose in Jesus telling this parable. And we realise the original listeners aren't wiping tears from their eyes.

They're offended. Because Jesus' purpose in telling this parable was not to give us a sentimental message that somehow God will accept us no matter what we do.

He's here to basically say this. Everything you've ever heard and everything you've ever thought about how to approach God is wrong. The story continues in Act 2 when a new conflict arises and the father throws a feast.

[13:26] So Jesus continues. The older brother was in the field and when he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So, fair enough, he asked the servant, what's going on?

The servant replied, your brother has come home and your father has killed a fattened calf for him because he has him back safe. The older brother's furious.

He was so angry that he refused to go in and join the feast. It was his turn now to assault the integrity of the family. By not going in, in effect he was saying, I will not be part of this family.

I'm the heir and I don't want to be in the same family with him in it. Count me out. Love moved first. The father comes out and pleads with the older brother but he won't come in.

He's abrasive to the father. He says, look, and notice he doesn't actually call him father. He says, look, all these years I've been good. I've never disobeyed you and when this son of yours has squandered your property and comes home, you kill a fattened calf for him.

[14:36] I won't come in. Notice he doesn't say, my brother. He doesn't even say, your son. He says, this son of yours. He will not acknowledge being in the same family with him.

Now, the older brother is furious but he's particularly upset because he objects to the cost. In those days, people rarely ate meat at a meal. It was too expensive. It was a great delicacy but the most expensive delicacy of all was the fattened calf and it was not the sort of thing that you would do even for a private party.

So when the father kills the fattened calf, we know that meant that the entire village would have been at this costly feast and the elder brother is too furious to go in.

So you don't need to agree to realise killing the fattened calf and inviting the village is a demonstration that for the father, this is the greatest day of his life. The elderly brother certainly sees that but it doesn't matter to him.

He doesn't care. All he sees is that the father is using his inheritance in a way that he doesn't approve of. His father wouldn't even give him a goat for his mates to have a barbie. So what does the older brother really care about?

[15 : 54] He doesn't care about the father's heart. All he cares about is the father's things. The estate. He cares about the expense of all this.

So the father goes out to plead with the elder brother and he says, my son, you're always with me and everything I have is yours. And that's the literal truth because when he divided the property between them, the younger son took his share and left, leaving him as the rightful heir, the elder brother.

The inheritance is all his. But now that the younger brother has returned, all he can see is that share diminishing because he'd been returned into the family. He's furious and he actually humiliates his father.

Being forced to come out of the feast would have brought shame on the father as much as the son's refusal to come in and join the celebration. He makes his father come out of his feast to argue with him but see how the father responds with tender, generous grace.

He says, my son, I still want you in the feast. And just as we're on the edge of our seats, just as we're asking the questions, how will the older brother respond?

[17 : 11] Will the family be reunited in love? Will they all come together at the end? Jesus ends the parable. There's no resolution. It's a cliffhanger.

And why? What is Jesus trying to get across to us? In the first act, we get a very traditional depiction of sin. We look at the younger brother and say, yeah, insulting the father, lover of prostitutes, partying, in a pigsty, gutter life, immoral, lustful, selfish, self-indulgent.

I recognise that that's sin. But when we get to the end of act two, Jesus has completely turned the tables. Here's what we see. There are two sons, one good and one bad, but they're both alienated from the father.

And you come to realise that they both want the father's things, but not the father. They've both been using the father to get the things they really love, wealth and status.

But one has been doing it by being very, very bad and the other has been trying to do it by being very, very good. Why does the other older brother not go into the feast?

[18 : 28] He tells us, he says, and this is a refusal here in verses 28 to 30, I've never disobeyed you. There it is.

That's the reason I'm mad. That's the reason why I'm not going into the feast. In other words, the thing that is keeping him from the father is not his sin, it's his goodness.

It's his righteousness. The younger brother was trying to get control by leaving and disobeying. The older brother was trying to get control by staying and obeying.

The younger brother was trying to get control of the father's things by breaking all the rules, but the older brother was trying to get control of all the father's things by keeping the rules.

Selfish or self-righteous. Jesus is showing us they're both lost. They are both lost.

[19 : 27] They're both without a relationship to the father. They're both alienated from the father and they're both alienated from God. So there are two kinds of lostness. That's the reason Jesus put the elder brother in the parable.

You can escape God just as much through morality and religion as you can escape God through immorality and irreligion. All world religions except the unique grace-filled Christian faith follow the older brother model.

And there are a lot of irreligious people in the secular world who are do-good people and even a lot of Christians can have an older brother type of heart.

If in your heart of hearts you say I try very hard I'm a good person I try to be obedient I'm doing ministry I go to church I pray I try to serve Jesus therefore God you owe me answer my prayers give me a good life and take me to heaven when I die.

If that's the language of your heart then Jesus is your model and Jesus is your example and Jesus is your boss that Jesus is not your saviour. You're seeking to be your own saviour and all your morality and all your religion it's all just a way to get God to give you the things you really want but they're not God himself.

[20 : 57] Elder brothers obey God to get things from God and if things aren't forthcoming they get angry. God mustn't be real. But gospel believing Christians I might say this twice so it sinks in a bit.

Christians obey God just to get God just to resemble him and love him and know him and delight in him. Obey God just to get God just to resemble him and love him and know him and delight in him. So the most stunning thing about this parable is the way it ends. The younger brother went off but comes back repents humbles himself and goes into the feast and is saved.

But the elder brother the good man the one who kept all the moral rules is lost as far as we know. And Jesus' listeners know exactly what his point is and it's the complete reversal of everything they've ever been taught and everything they believe.

You can almost hear them gasp as this story ends. the lover of prostitutes is saved and the man of moral uprightness is lost.

[22 : 16] Most of us think that God wants good people but Jesus shows us that God wants new people. We like to think that the good are saved and the bad are lost but Jesus shows us they are both lost and though they might look different on the surface underneath they're exactly the same.

We think that to be saved is to repent of our sins and Jesus shows us that we also have to repent of even the very reason we ever did anything good at all. We can't earn God's love like the attempts of the older child and we don't deserve God's love like the younger child but by his generous grace our heavenly father reconciles us pays the restitution cost welcomes us and gives us full status as his children through Jesus and Jesus alone.

Love moved first. Love moved first.