

April 4, 2010

The Prodigal Father

Luke 15:11-32

Today we celebrate the greatest event in human history and the single most important evidence of the authenticity of the gospel – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is the greatest event because by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God validated His sacrifice for sin on behalf of all of mankind. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians: *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,* 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

He went on to say: *If there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith also is vain...for if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.'* 1 Corinthians 15:13-17 ***But Christ is risen from the dead! Our preaching is not vain – our faith is not worthless – there is forgiveness of sins and the hope of life eternal!*** There are many other faiths and religions and beliefs in the world, but none of them bear the evidence of authenticity that the gospel of Jesus Christ bears. Buddha is dead and gone – you can visit the grave of Mohammed – but Christ is risen! Men have tried to deny it and hide it and explain it away, but after all those attempts, the resurrection of Christ stands as the central incontrovertible truth of the gospel and the firm foundation of our faith.

It is because of the resurrection that we have the hope of life eternal with Christ. And it is because of the resurrection that we proclaim the gospel of salvation to a lost and dying world. And that is what I want to do this morning. Some of you have come this morning because you believe – some of you have come this morning even though you do not believe – some of you came willingly – others perhaps were dragged here. I think I can even see the skid marks. But for all of you, believers and unbelievers alike, I want to proclaim the saving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ yet again, and I pray that as I do, the word of God will penetrate your heart and minds and make the truth of the resurrection of Jesus a reality in your life.

This morning we are going to look at a fairly familiar story from the gospel of Luke. In many of your Bibles the sub-heading reads – The Prodigal Son. But that is misleading since you might get the idea that this story is only about one son – the prodigal. But in fact Jesus begins this story by saying *"There was a man who had two sons"*. So this might be better titled, ***A Story of Two Sons***, or even better, ***A Story of a Father's Love***. Because it is the Father's love for both his sons that is at the heart of this little story. In fact, in every sense, this is a story about our heavenly Father's ***prodigal*** love for us.

You might suppose, given the way this story has been told and illustrated so many times, that prodigal is a synonym for wayward – as illustrated by the wasted, wayward life of the youngest son. And the word does mean 'recklessly spendthrift' or spending until you have nothing left, which the younger son did. But this leaves out the equally important story of the older son who was not wayward or prodigal. But it is the father in the story, we will see who was the prodigal one – he demonstrated a spare-no-expense, reckless love toward both his sons. And in this is the story of our heavenly Father who demonstrated a recklessly spendthrift love toward us when He sent His only Son to die for sinners like you and I: *but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Romans 5:8

The story itself is very simple. A man had two sons and the younger one asked him one day for his inheritance. He got it and then took off for a far country where he squandered it all on frivolous and sensuous pleasures. He found himself eventually living with the pigs and returned home in humility and repentance, and to his surprise was welcomed with open arms by his father. This really made the older brother angry and alienated, and the story closes with the father pleading with the older brother to join in the celebration of his younger brother's repentance and forgiveness. Those are the bare bones of the story, but before we dive into the meat of it, we need to remind ourselves to whom Jesus was telling the story. Who was His audience and what was it that prompted Him to tell this story?

Luke tells us that there were **two groups of people** who had come to hear Jesus. If we go back to the beginning of the chapter we read: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable...* Luke 15:1-3 Actually He told them three parables that day. He told them about a man who has a hundred sheep and has discovered that he has lost one of them and so he goes out and searches until he finds it and brings it home. In the second we have a woman who has lost one of her ten coins and she scours the house till she finds that one coin. And then the final parable is this one about a man with two sons. These stories are all tied together and the similarities are obvious. In each story you have something lost, something found and each one ends with a festive celebration. But this third parable makes an additional point the others do not and we will get to that.

Jesus' telling of these stories had everything to do with His audience. The first group, the tax collectors and the sinners correspond to the younger son in the story. They were the bad boy, as it were. This group lived outside the moral code of the Scriptures and the ceremonial purity of practicing religionists of their day. They were the ones engaged in '**reckless living**' and had left their homes by leaving the traditional morality of their families and society. The second group, the Pharisees and the scribes, were the older son in the story. They were the ones who stayed home and took care of business while the younger son was out squandering his inheritance. They were the '**good**' son, careful to obey the law and all the ritual ceremonies that attended it. And Luke tells us through the grammar of the Greek language that this sort of gathering around Jesus by sinners and tax collectors, was an ongoing phenomenon. Everywhere He went, they showed up.

And nearly every time we read about the younger sons of society showing up where Jesus was, we also read about the older sons showing up and being less than happy about the way Jesus reached out to the sinners and tax collectors. Here Luke says that they were grumbling and saying, *This man receives sinners and eats with them*. In this culture, to eat with someone meant that you accepted them and that was intolerable to these good people. In other words, they were essentially saying, *How dare Jesus accept that crowd! Doesn't He know these guys are sinners? Their lifestyle is sinful – they never go to synagogue. He must be just telling them what they want to hear!*

I love the way Luke phrases this: *'So he told them this parable...'* **It was in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus told these three stories**, not because the tax collectors and sinners were there. I have heard this parable of the father with two sons told many times, and always the focus was on how the father richly and freely forgave his younger son. And because that is such a powerful picture of how God forgives and welcomes us, it would be easy to imagine the emotional impact that this story would have on the original hearers. But we forget that the target of this parable was not the reckless sinners who eagerly gathered to hear Jesus speak, but the angry, grumbling good people represented by the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus was not speaking to the bad boys of society as much as He was speaking to those who thought they held the high moral ground. He was exposing their smug, narrow-minded, self-righteous attitude that prevented them from receiving Him as the sinners did. It is as we will see a story of not just one, but two lost sons.

We first have the story of the younger son who came to his father and demanded his share of the estate. *And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.'* Everyone of those who heard this story, including the tax collectors and the sinners, would have been astounded at such request. In those days, this father's inheritance would have passed to both sons. The older would have gotten twice as much as the younger by the tradition of those times, but only when the father had died. For the younger son to ask his father for his inheritance now was the same as wishing his father was dead. Both groups would have been offended and angered by such a request.

But the father's response was even more astounding to them. In an age of deference and respect for not only those who were older, but even more for one's parents, the father would have been within his rights to disinherit the son entirely, and indeed those who heard this story would have expected it. But the father simply divided the inheritance and let him go. To really understand what kind of sacrifice this was, we need to understand the basis of wealth in this age. The word translated '**property**' is the Greek word for **living**. The father in other words, **divided his living up**, giving the younger son one third and keeping two-thirds for the older son. His living would have been most likely tied up in the land they worked and so to get the one third of his worth needed to give the younger son, he would have probably forced to sell a great deal of his real estate. So what the younger son is asking, is for his father to rip apart his life to satisfy his desire. And I am sure that crowd was astounded that this father did so, apparently without comment or condemnation.

And we know the rest of the younger son's story – he *gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living*. And when he had spent all the money he had, a famine came and he was forced to take any work he could, which happened to be with the pigs. And it was there, in the depths of despondency and failure, that he had a saving thought. *'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."*' Luke 15:17-19

His revelation in the pigsty was that he had been a very bad boy indeed, and the only way he could make it up was to work back into his father's good graces. And that is the way many people approach God. They do know that their life is a wreck – they know they have blown it – they know that they have sinned. But their plan is to work it off. They just want to be a hired hand and earn God's grace. But grace is the only thing you can't work for – otherwise it isn't grace. If you can earn it – it is wages, not grace. The Bible tells us that *'...the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life'*. Romans 6:23 Grace is a gift and as such cannot be earned.

And so this son comes home, rehearsing his repentance on the way, and *while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him*. Luke 15:20 This is almost more astounding than when this father gave this boy his inheritance. Distinguished Middle Eastern fathers did not pick up their robes and run, especially to a son that had disgraced him in the eyes of the community. But this one did – running up to him and embracing him and giving him the kiss of acceptance. The son then delivers his speech, but his father ignores his carefully rehearsed spiel and says, *to his servants, 'Bring quickly 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, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:22-24

The robe and ring and sandals are not just introduced for effect. They were a very meaningful response to the son's return. The best robe in the house was undoubtedly the father's own robe, signifying **the restored status of the son in the family**; the ring was probably his own signet ring, signifying that **whoever wore that ring had the father's trust and authority**; and the sandals meant that his son was not a servant or slave, but a **free man**. In addition, the fatted calf was killed and put on the spit. This was a calf that had been carefully fed and cared for in anticipation for a rare feast. Since meat was not in the menu for everyday fare, this was indeed a special occasion. Invitations were sent out, the guests were gathered and the party began.

What this says to us is that the love and grace of God can and will forgive any wrongdoing, restore any sinner, pardon the worst of crimes. **There are no depths of sin beyond the reach of God's grace**. There is no evil the Father's love cannot pardon and cover, no sin that is outside the power of His grace to cleanse. What this says to us is that our heavenly Father's love is **prodigal** – it is recklessly spendthrift – He spares no expense – He is lavish beyond words. In Ephesians, Paul tells us: *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us*. Ephesians 1:7-8 And I think the sinners and the tax collectors got it. But I think it just made the Pharisees mad. Which is why the story is about two sons.

The other point Jesus was making has to do with the older son. Remember him? He stayed home. He was the good son. When he hears from one of the servants that his wastrel brother has come back, and that his father has reinstated him in the family, he isn't glad – he's furious. Furthermore he won't even go into the party. His father has to come out to beg him to come in. Now, instead of a younger son disgracing his father by his outrageous request, we have the older son disgracing his father by his refusal to come to the party and by his actions, publicly saying that his father is wrong. That would be a huge dishonor in this community.

So his father comes out and pleads with him to join the party to welcome his brother's return, but this brother has a ready reply: *but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'* Luke 15:29-30 He was so angry that he couldn't even be civil. He refuses to address his father in the very respectful and elaborate way this culture demanded, but instead simply says, 'Look you!' He is offended – he is angry – he seems to be more angry than the situation allows. So the question is, why is this guy so mad? Shouldn't he be a little bit glad his brother is still alive? But as with most things, if you follow the money you get your answer.

This brother wasn't angered so much that his brother had offended his father and the entire family. He probably wasn't that irate that he wasted the money that would have been his anyway. After all, the older brother still had two thirds of the original. No, the reason he was so angry was that his father, by restoring his brother to the family, made him an heir again of one third of the estate. The older brother saw his two thirds shrinking! His thinking was directly related to what was due him and he worked hard for it: *Look, I have worked hard for you, and I never ran off or disobeyed you or disgraced you like my brother. But when this poor excuse for a son shows up, you lavish him with love and invite him back into the inheritance. That's not fair – that's not right. He should have to earn it just like I did.'*

And the father was just as gracious and loving with this older son's rebellion as he was with the younger's. *'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 is alive; he was lost, and is found.'*" Luke 15:31-32 He was saying in effect, 'You didn't earn anything – it is yours by right of inheritance. He was inviting his older son to swallow his pride and come into the feast – to join in the celebration and welcome his brother back into the family. Again he could have disinherited this son for publicly humiliating him and defying his authority. But his response is as lavish with grace toward the older son as it had been toward the younger. And just as we are waiting to see how he will respond – Jesus ends the story. And I can understand why we focus on the story of the younger son. It is a story full of a father's love and grace and there is forgiveness and redemption and restoration at the end of it. It's a great story. But this older brother's saga, ends with an unanswered question – will he accept the free gift of grace or not? And this is why this story was really aimed at those who thought they were good enough for God.

Earlier I said that this is the story of two lost sons – one lost through disobedience and rebellion and self-seeking pleasure; and the other lost through rigid moral conformity and working hard to earn the prize. We are confronted with these two sons – one '*bad*' by conventional standards and one '*good*'. And yet both of them are alienated at some point from the father – both have to be invited into the celebration feast – both stand in need of redemption. But the older son's story is unresolved. And I believe that is the case because in some ways it is easier for those who know they are bad – who know they have sinned – to accept the free gift of grace that they know they do not deserve or could ever earn. But older sons who are good still cling to the idea that by doing good they somehow merit salvation. It was not the older son's wrongdoing that kept him from the feast, but his right-doing, his righteousness that kept him out.

And that is how it is with good people – people who stick to the rules, who work hard to earn something – even those religious people who may go to church, pay their taxes and tithes, obey the law. Theirs is a mindset that says ***because I've been good, God owes me.*** God ought to bless me and help me because I've been a good person. If that is how it is with you, then Jesus may be your example, or even inspiration, but He's not your Savior. Older sons obey God to get things – not to have a relationship with Him. The older brother in this story could have humbled himself, delighted his father, and gone into the feast and celebrated his brother's return. But his motivation was not to please his father but himself. If you are somehow trying to manipulate God by being good – then you are simply attempting to use God to get what you want – ***you don't want Him.*** Older sons believe that if you live a good life – you should get a good life. And when that doesn't happen, they get angry – like the older son.

And this is why both sons in the story are lost. They are lost with respect to the father. They have both sinned by preferring their own way over the fathers. The fundamental cause of evil in the world is the unmitigated self-centeredness of the human heart. Sin is not just breaking the rules – sin means that you prefer your own way rather than God's. Effectively you put yourself in the place of God and therefore don't need a Savior. ***The prerequisite for receiving the grace is knowing that you need it.*** Everyone knows that the gospel calls us to repent from bad living – to turn from selfish, reckless, licentious behavior. But not many realize that the gospel also calls us to repent from legalistic older son behavior. Both put us at the center of our universe – both keep us from the grace that would save us – both mean that we wear the crown and not Christ.

Finally, we need to see something from this story in relation to the other two stories. In the first two stories the thing that was lost was searched for by someone. The man who had a hundred sheep and lost one, went after it until he found it. The woman who lost the one coin, lit a lamp and swept the house, searching diligently for that coin. But in this story, no one went after the younger son to find him. Someone should have – everyone who was listening to this story would have understood that something was missing here – but no one did. So who should have gone out and looked? I believe it was the older son's place to go after his brother. In the first chapters of Genesis we read about another proud and angry older brother to whom God said 'You are your brother's keeper. You should have loved him, instead you've killed him'.

In describing this, Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York, in his book, *The Prodigal God*, puts it this way: *This is what the elder brother should have done; this is what a true elder brother would have done. He would have said, 'Father, my younger brother has been a fool and now his life is in ruins. But I will go look for him and bring him home. And if the inheritance is gone – as I expect – I'll bring him back into the family at my expense'*. And it would have been, as we have seen, entirely at the older brother's expense. When the father told the older son *'All that I have is yours'* he was being quite literal. Everything was the older son's by inheritance – even the robe and ring and shoes and the fatted calf.

To reinstate his brother was costly – and this guy wasn't willing to pay the bill. Forgiveness always comes at a cost to the one granting the forgiveness. The father couldn't just forgive the younger son – he knew that his forgiveness and acceptance would come at a tremendous cost to the older son. But this older brother doesn't want to pay the price of forgiveness. By doing this, giving His listeners an older brother who is angry and selfish and mean, and leaving the story for all intents and purposes, unresolved, Jesus was in essence showing them that they needed an older brother who would pay the price. And it was Jesus who paid that price.

The main point of this parable is that whether we are living lives of reckless disobedience, or we are toeing the line, being obedient and 'good', we all stand in need of grace. We all need forgiveness for living life the way we want instead of the way God wants. And forgiveness comes at a price. Jesus is that older brother who paid the price for our forgiveness on the cross. Jesus was stripped of His robes that we might be robed in His righteousness. He emptied Himself so that we might be filled. He drank the bitter cup of sorrow so that we might have all joy. Isaiah 53 puts it best: *But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed*. Isaiah 53:5 Jesus is our older brother who is looking for us to bring us to the Father. To clothe us with His robes and put His ring on our fingers and sandals on our feet, and join Him in the celebration feast.

I don't know where you see yourself today. Perhaps it is as the younger son – living recklessly, selfishly, doing your own thing and running from God. Perhaps you are that bad boy – and you know it. Perhaps you think you've run so far from God and done things so bad you could never expect to find forgiveness and acceptance. But if you are living with the pigs, it is time to come to your senses and get up and go home and say to your heavenly Father, *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before You'*. I tell you He is standing on tiptoe watching for you to come – waiting to receive your confession and to wrap you up in His arms and welcome you in.

Or maybe you are the other son, you are living a good moral life – you might even be going to church regularly. But your obedience is, in the end, a means to get what you want – not to get God. In fact you probably don't even think you need Him very much. After all, you are a good person and good people go to heaven don't they? They should, they deserve it. But if that is where you are and you feel fine where you are without Christ – I don't want to leave you feeling fine in your sin. A good moral life without Christ is, in the end, *life without Christ* and that means an eternity when you die *without Christ*. Jesus Himself said, *'I did not come to call the self-righteous, but sinners to repentance'*. Luke 5:32 Unless you understand that you are a sinner in need of salvation just as much as that younger son, you won't hear Christ calling. Don't let your righteousness keep you out of the feast. On the one hand your badness won't keep you out of the Father's feast – on the other, your goodness won't get you in.

I want to invite both groups, the good and the bad, to the feast of the Father. This morning we will close with communion. Communion was one of the few ordinances that Jesus gave the church before He went to the cross. It is a sign and symbol of our communion with Jesus Christ and with His Father. It is a *sign* that we have come home and found forgiveness of sin and acceptance by the Father into His household. It is a *reminder* of the incredible sacrifice that Jesus the Son of God made on our behalf when He went to the cross for our sins. It is also a *symbol* of the feast of love and joy we share with those who have been redeemed, forgiven and restored. And so if you have found yourself in either of those groups of people and long to be part of the family of God – all you need to do is ask. Saying, *'Father please forgive me because I have sinned against You and I don't deserve any consideration of grace or mercy. But You say in Your word that it is upon the humble in heart that You will look, look on me today and grant salvation in Jesus name.'*

If you have not prayed that prayer, committing your life to Christ, please don't take the elements as the men pass them around. There is no saving grace in these symbols of a greater truth. We are saying by taking them that we are those who have come home, we have passed from death into life as John the apostle wrote. But again, if you have not committed your life to Christ, I urge you, by the mercies of God to do so. Today is the day of salvation – there may not be another opportunity, and life is too short to procrastinate.

Our gracious and loving Father,

We thank You this morning for sending Your Son to die for our sins on the cross. We rejoice that You accepted His sacrifice on our behalf by raising Him from the dead. We confess that we are sinners and we deserve Your righteous judgment. We have not loved You as we ought; we have chosen to go our own way; and in a thousand other ways we have sinned against heaven and against You. Forgive us O Lord, for our hard-hearted pride and deliberate sin. Forgive us for not loving You and counting You more precious than life. By the sacrifice of Jesus and by the power of His resurrection, forgive us our sins we pray and give us a new heart and cause us to walk in Your will. Grant Oh Lord, that we would serve you with the passion that we once served ourselves and that our highest joy would be to do what You want. Thank You for the promise of mercy and grace for those who repent. Show us the infinite and all satisfying glory of the risen Christ and give us hearts that love You supremely. Thank You that You do not leave us feeling fine in our sin and rebellion but in Your mercy you make us feel lost enough to be led to life. Fill us, Holy Spirit, with new life and a fresh desire to glorify God in our lives, we pray in the precious and powerful name of our resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.