

Luke 15:11-32

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[0 : 00] The passage we read in the Gospel of Luke, and there at the very last verse, verse 32, where the father in the story protests, But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. Now, this perhaps is one of the best-known passages in all of Scripture, the parable of the prodigal son, and it's long been recognized as one of the most beautiful stories that was ever told.

And it rings so true to human experience, so many of us can find ourselves in some way or another in this very story. It speaks above all of the unshakable love of God, and it sets forth the glory of His grace toward repentant sinners.

And what's often forgotten, of course, about this parable is that it is a parable of two sons, and both of them are prodigal in their own way.

And it was told for a particular purpose of highlighting the position of those who murmur and who dissent and refuse to share the joy of a repentant sinner's return to the fold of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 33] I remember reading this once in a home where I was visiting, and the man of the house said he always had a lot of sympathy for the elder son in the story.

He thought he had got a bad deal. And it was entirely news to him to learn that the whole point of the parable was to see the unrepentant bigotry of the elder brother.

You see, there are two sons lost here in this story. One in a foreign country far away, and the other lost in his own home behind a barricade of his own self-righteousness.

The younger son, well, he's totally selfish. He thinks only of himself. He's got a reckless love of life. He's one of these guys that knows everything. You can tell him nothing.

And he sees no reason why he shouldn't be desired, he shouldn't be denied any pleasure that he wants. But he fails to realize that that will lead to emptiness rather than satisfaction.

[2 : 46] If you will read the second chapter of Ecclesiastes, you'll see how wise, wise Solomon tells that very story in his own experience. He found that to pursue every desire you have will finish up in, if it's selfish desire, finishes up in emptiness.

The elder son, someone said, well, he asked for nothing, he desired nothing, and he enjoyed nothing. He considered himself the model of a dutiful son, a real paragon of virtue.

Yet, he was so totally the center of his own life that he was quite unable to enter into his father's joys and sorrows. And when you think of how instantly he attributes to his younger brother profligacy and immorality, as well as extravagance, with no more than his own imagination, or at least at best perhaps hearsay evidence, we might conclude that it was perhaps the elder brother's insufferable self-righteousness that had no small part to play in the reason why the younger brother was so keen to quit the home and get away.

Nonetheless, there was no excuse for the younger son's heartless demand for his share of the family inheritance while his father was still alive, and then for his immediate departure.

And we might wonder also why his father let him go. But I guess he was one of those know-it-all teenagers who always knew better than his parents, and with whom the father perhaps had decided, well, I can just do nothing with this guy.

[4 : 36] And the only way to teach him of his folly was to let him have his own way. And boy, did he not learn. He was as stupid as he was heartless.

And he soon found out, he found not freedom, but ultimately he found bondage, bondage to his own personality, to his circumstances, and to his greedy friends, who very soon left him stripped and alone, just the consequences of his own indulgence.

Rebelling against his father, you see, didn't lead to the freedom he expected, but to waste, to destruction of his possibilities, and to utter humiliation, in which no man could or would help him. You see, no one intends, when they set out like this, to end up in the pigsty, but sadly how many do? So it was in the garden of Eden, in the rebellion there, how low it brought the selfish, self-willed race that is mankind, and robbed us of the blessings of man's true home.

I want you to look at the attitude.

[6 : 21] See, first we have the brokenness of an awakened heart. Now, there was no doubt about the proud, arrogant, selfishness, and self-confidence of this young fellow as he leaves home.

You could tell him nothing, but the swine fields soon broke all that down. The memory of it. Being in a situation where he was totally dependent on others. The shame of being a Jew among pigs, and the total helplessness of the situation.

Just where could he go from there? I remember someone summing up the story of this young, this part of this young man's life. He was willful, first of all.

He was going to do what he was going to do, and that was it. And the result was, it led on to being wasteful. He was totally selfish. He had no thought of anything else.

[7 : 21] And the comment that was made there was just this. All selfish life is waste. If your life is lived just for yourself, it's a total waste.

And the willful, wasteful man soon was woeful, sitting there alone, without a penny, doubtless in rags, filthy, and on the smell of the pigs and hungry.

He was woeful. Anybody know about going down that road and landing there? Well, you see what happened to him there? He became wistful.

He began to think about home. You know, it wasn't so bad after all. It says he came to himself. He suddenly came to his senses and thought, well, look where I am.

How good it is at times to have everything just distracted from us and from the realities of life and what we really are, and see that all suddenly stripped away and see ourselves in the stark, naked truth of what God has been saying to us for years, but our ears have been plugged against anything penetrating about that, about our own situation and before God.

[8 : 35] We never listened. But sometimes he brings us to a place where we just have to listen. Hopefully it's not in a pig pen. Maybe it'll be at a boy's camp.

Who knows? Maybe in church today God will speak to you and you'll have to listen. It demolished this boy's image of himself, an image he had held so long.

It showed his need of help. It turned his thoughts for a happy moment to his father. It broke his heart. It was just to think of what he had done.

I have sinned against him and against you, Father. You know, it's an awful thing to lose a parent. You remember the things that you never said sorry for, and it's too late. I still think of that. Long time since my father died. Look after your parents.

[9 : 37] And how it brought our selfish self-will. It broke his heart to think what he had done. So for his own sake and his own father's sake, he would go home in spite of what he might face there.

He'll go home and admit his sin. He'll go home and seek mercy in spite of his fear of friends. Fear of family, and perhaps especially of his elder brother.

Fear of being not accepted. Will my father take me home back at all? But he sees this as his only hope. There's nowhere else to go. So he puts his pride in his pocket, and he decides to go.

And it's a long road. It was a far country. And you can see him on this road rehearsing this speech that he's made. Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, and I'm not worthy to be.

Could you just give me a job as a servant like these others in the house? He's a broken man coming to cast himself on hope for mercy.

[10 : 47] But there, in that situation, his father saw him. And I'm glorious. The father had been watching. From the day he disappeared over the hill or wherever it was, he'd been watching and watching.

Till he would see that speck on the horizon that would rather be bigger and become the image of his son. And he would see it, and the old man left everything, and he ran when he was a great way off and threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The brokenness of an awakened heart, and then you have the bigotry, on the other hand, of a blinded spirit. I get the feeling it was a good thing that the elder son was in the field while the younger son appeared on the horizon, and the father ran to that meeting a great way off.

Had he met the elder son first, there might have been a disaster. Certainly, the elder son wouldn't have approved of the younger son's reception and restoration.

You see, there was no forgiveness with him. There was a hardness in his heart. And alas, there are too many who are just like that. There's no forgiveness. Ah, they got what they deserve.

[11:58] They brought it on themselves. Too many. You may make a blunder, and some people will never forget. I wonder if you've had things cast up that you thought were dealt with long, long ago, and say, ah, yeah, I remember what you did.

God's not like that. And the gospel's not like that. That's not the gospel. Every word his brother speaks shows how unattractive and how unbending his character is.

And the news of his brother's return sets him thinking of his own rights. Have I not got rights here? I've been working here. And his deserts. Jealousy arises.

He's been wronged because his brother has been treated with more than justice. And his protest. All these years, I have slaved for you. It seems that he thinks not of working in concert with his father, sharing in the good of the business with his father, but it's just been an unrewarding slavery. I have slaved for you all these years. And the obedience that he's so proud of, as he's admitting, it has just been a slavish work for reward, and not just the delight of doing his father's will.

[13:12] His brother, well, he disowns him. You notice that? This son of yours. How cruel can he get to the father?

This son of yours. He puts the worst possible construction on it, on his conduct. You see, where is love?

Love, says the Bible, thinks no evil. And boy, he was a way ahead of that. He knew exactly before he had heard anything where this guy had been and what kind of things he had done.

He was jealous. You see here, this fellow, he's full of contempt. He's full of his own conceit. Never once did I disobey you.

Oh, well. You know, what some people call a good conscience. It's nothing but a bad memory. Never once did I disobey your command.

[14:12] And he's jealous, and he's covetous. You never gave me a young goat, even. You give him the fatted calf. Look at me. I've been here all the time. He's got a lovelessness that can't forgive.

And his reaction to the music is to inquire, what's it all about? And certainly, he's got no readiness to go in and have a dance or even a feast in that situation.

The attitudes the father encountered, but then look at the response the father's love faced. What's clear is that the father's love for one was as great as his love for the other, and both are invited in to the merrymaking.

On one hand, we've got reception of the father's grace. You know, I can hardly picture the wonder that must have broken over the younger son's face.

As the realization comes home to him in the waves of fresh, in wave after wave of fresh sweetness of what's really happening to him. He has been received.

[15:18] I haven't been turned away. My father has actually gone out of his way to run. My old man running. He's run to meet me. Even before I get home.

And as soon as his confession reaches the words, I am no more worthy to be called your son, he doesn't get the rest of it finished. He's cut off.

That's the one thing that shows he's fit to be received, that he knows he's not worthy. He's casting himself on his father's mercy.

He's interrupted, and orders are given to the servants who no doubt run after the old man. What the nurse, this old man going, and after they go after him, and there they find him. And when he comes out of that embrace and rely with his son, and he realizes there, he says, the fatted calf, the best robe, a ring for his finger, shoes for his feet.

No more. Sons don't have bare feet. And the fatted calf is to be killed, and the pardon is complete, and the restoration is just too wonderful to believe.

[16:26] His wildest hopes are superseded far more than he ever even dared to imagine. Can you imagine the prodigal resisting and saying, oh, no, Dad, no, no.

I won't have it. Not a bit. Can you think of him declining? He came with empty hands and a broken heart, and the Father filled him with his great love and his generous heart.

This is Jesus' picture of the sinner's reception by God. That's what Augustus' top lady was thinking about when he wrote these words, There's nothing in my hand I bring. Simple. To your cross I cling. Naked, come to you for dress. Helpless, look to you for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly.

Wash me, Savior, or I die. There's the prayer that God delights to answer. Not on the ground of merit.

[17 : 27] Not on the ground of anything we deserve, but on the promise. That he casts nobody out. Not the worst prodigal if he comes to repent.

But the Father also met refusal of the Father's invitation. He was angry, and he would not go in. This contemptuous, critical, covetous, complaining brother was cross as well.

It's implied that he was invited to come and share the Father's joy, the family's joy, and the Father's happiness, and all the merriment, but he refused.

The invitation was to share the Father's joy, to join in his Father's mind in the matter, and share his Father's care for this long-lost brother who's learned a mighty expensive lesson.

But he refused. But he refused. He stood outside the family home, and he remained outside the Father's heart. And his reasons were, he was far more faithful than his brother.

[18 : 43] He never had a party. I think a relevant question is, would a guy like this have any friends to have at a party? And that his father was behaving in an unseemly way in the light in what he, the elder son, with his vast knowledge of what kind of person his brother had been, what he considered what his father had done.

And it was a self-righteousness that set him just, not just above his brother, but above his father too. Self-righteousness leaves him in a bitter and inhuman, with a little concern for the care of his brother's recovery and return.

You know, it's a sad and solemn warning to those who sit on the fence in the matters of their soul's salvation and the salvation of others.

Plenty of people in our churches, boy, they can tell you what's wrong with the church. If they don't enter in, they're not members, but boy, they can tell you this and that. But they don't go in themselves.

They know better than God about some things. They have little time or understanding or patience with those who come to repentance. They stand back critically, looking on, while making their own knowledgeable and snide remarks about the sincerity of some repentant person.

[20 : 19] Aye, they may be in the church or near home. But still, they're far from the Father's heart. They're full of themselves.

And like the Pharisees, they have their own rules of how things should be, and they will live like that, and they'll die like that, in spite of what the Bible says or the gospel is asking them to, the way the gospel is asking them to act.

Respectable self-righteousness. And perhaps they're very religious, but they're still outside the fold of Christ. Those in the far country are no more lost than they, unless that bigotry is lost in brokenness.

They won't have a place in the Father's heart because they shut themselves out. But lastly, we have the reaction the Father displayed. And to sum up, we have here delight and disappointment. There's the delight of a longing realized. You see, this Father had never forgotten the boy. His eye had been on that road continually, in his thoughts night and day.

[21 : 29] All his living had been colored by this fact that that boy was gone. He wasn't in the home. He wasn't there to help. It just would be pressed in on him every day. He wasn't at the breakfast table.

He was. This is what he had thought about. This boy had rebelled and gone. And so it's not very surprising that he should spot him when he appeared on the horizon.

There was what he had joked about perhaps and longed for and hoped for against hope for many a long and weary day. But when he heard the young man's confession, he could hardly believe his ears.

Here was now someone who was ready for all the Father would give him to show his love and to make completely clear that he was forgiven and that without reserve, that forgiveness was real in spite of all that he had done.

The lad had come home. The lad had come home in a state where there was room for his father to show him forgiveness. He had an empty heart, full ready to be filled with the love.

[22 : 41] And you notice in the beginning of the story he's saying, give me. Give me the share of the inheritance. I want it and I'm going. And what is he saying now?

He's saying, make me. Make me. What a change is there. The Father's joy is unconfined. The servant's gaze and is rejoicing.

Everyone knows the hard lessons of sin have been learned. The pardon of the Father is enjoyed and his delight is full. That the Son is home.

Home now, never to go out. Like Onesimus, who stole from Philemon and ran away to Rome. And in the providence of God, encountered the apostle, perhaps in a prison cell.

There he gave his heart to Jesus under the teaching of Paul. Paul sends him back and says, here he is. Perhaps he went away just so that he would be back, never to go out.

[23 : 45] So that he could be received forever. You know, it's a wonderful thing to know. Our God delights in mercy.

Find that in the Old Testament. Underline it. What a precious word. He delights in mercy. And lastly, there was disappointment of hope deferred.

Delight and disappointment. You know, hope deferred makes the heart sick. That's what the writer of the Proverbs says. All these years the elder son had been home.

All these years he shared his father's work. He shared his table. Shared his conversation. But never once did he share his father's heart. Perhaps the father was praying every day that this hard heart would melt.

That he would take a step of repentance and recognize his need to bow before the grace of God and receive it. There's someone praying for you.

[24 : 48] Longing for you to change. And it's not happening. There's a hardness. That is not, you're not allowing anything to penetrate. I remember Tom Reese, the evangelist, saying once, the man who under God was instrumental in leading me to Christ.

He said, I always ask when someone is converted in one of my meetings, who's been praying for you? And almost without exception, no matter what that person's background is, they can say, oh yes, I have a granny.

I know somebody that I used to live with, I know she prays for me. Someone praying for you today. Is their prayer going to be answered? You see, both sons broke the father's heart.

One by his reckless, selfish, wild living. And the other by his stifling self-righteousness and unbending spirit. He no doubt hoped that the elder brother would bend someday.

And see the need to be of a mind with him. As regards his brother. He had hoped the younger brother would come to himself and come home repentant.

[26 : 02] But till now, he's got delight in one hand, but he's disappointed. And the events of the day seem to fix the gulf between them as being wider.

You see, there is a reaction in heaven to the attitude of individuals to the grace of the gospel. I wonder what's being said in heaven about you, about me today. Does heaven see bigotry or brokenness in our hearts?

Does it discern the reception or the rejection of God's loving grace to your soul? What is the reaction up there?

Could it be delight? Or is it going to be just another day of disappointment? That once again, self-satisfaction.

Someone has resolved to remain outside. Say, oh, well, there's perhaps another day. Or whatever. It will be one or the other. You know, it's utterly amazing to think that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting.

[27 : 10] You know, and it says elsewhere there's rejoicing in the presence of the angels. What does that mean? Does it mean not that God Himself is delighted and rejoicing when one sinner turns, recognizes his sin, comes with sorrow, and trusts the Savior?

We don't know how this story finished. Jesus left it there where the Father's words were uttered in our text.

And the question is, was the elder brother's attitude set solid in cement? Or was there something that happened? And there was a double joy in that home in the end.

I wonder if the angels are hanging over the very battlements of heaven, eager to know just what is going to happen in your life today. Right here.
You know, Jesus' word still stands firm and sure. Whoever comes to me, I will in no wise cast out.
[28 : 21] And that includes either of the prodigal brothers. Let's pray.