

Luke 15:1-32

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[0 : 00] Now I invite you to turn with me again in God's Word to Luke's Gospel, chapter 15. Luke's Gospel, chapter 15.

And we're going to look at the story of the lost or the prodigal son. The Christian church, including your own congregation here, has many prodigal sons and daughters.

I'm thinking of people who as children were brought up in godly, loving homes, who were taught God's Word about how to trust in Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life, about how to serve God and live a fruitful Christian life.

But somewhere along the line, like the young man in this story, they rejected all that teaching and they turned their backs on God.

Now in some cases, as here, they really messed up their lives, morally and spiritually, and maybe too physically, mentally and financially.

[1 : 28] But in other cases, they may have prospered in worldly terms. They may even have become useful citizens. But their hearts were hardened against God.

And the church, God's family, no longer played any part in their lives. But then, something happened.

Maybe suddenly, maybe gradually. Like this young man, they came to their senses. They realized the destructive consequences of their lifestyle for themselves and for other people.

And in heartfelt repentance, they cried out like this young man, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

And they turned back to their father's house. Now, of course, as with this young man, the road was far from easy.

[2 : 44] Would his father have him back? He had wasted his substance in riotous living. He had tarnished his father's reputation and despised his godly upbringing.

Had he blown his chances? Some of you may have heard the story of a young man, a modern equivalent of this lost son, who was brought up in a loving Christian home.

But eventually, he made his way to a distant city, cutting off all ties with his parents and with his church family.

He plunged into drink and unbridled sex, gambling and shady dealings.

His parents knew none of this because there was no communication anymore. But they feared the worst. However, year after year, they prayed for their lost son, that God would save him and restore him.

[4 : 05] And then one day, completely out of the blue, a letter arrived from their son. It told them of his wasted life, of his moral and spiritual desperation.

He recognized his sin, that only God could change his life. But having sunk so deeply into sin, would God or anyone else be willing to have him back?

Would his parents take such a shameful wretch back into their home? He told them that he would take the train back to his hometown, and if they were willing to forgive him and receive him, his mother should hang out a white sheet in the back garden next to the railway line.

If the sheep was there, he would get off at the station, but if it wasn't there, well, he would understand, he would travel on and never return.

On the agreed day, the train drew near his hometown. Was there any hope for him? He looked out of the carriage window.

[5 : 33] There was the garden with the washing line full of white sheets, every inch of grass, all the bushes and hedges, even the roof of the house, covered with sheets that sparkled brightly in the sun.

A sentimental story? Listen to God's word. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. So if you were once a prodigal in the far country, and you're here today, your sins forgiven, a true son or daughter of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice with you.

And we thank God for the spiritual home that you've found. If perhaps you're here, yearning over some prodigal, a son or a daughter, a husband or a wife, a brother or a sister, a close friend who seemed to walk with you the ways of God, but no more, then take courage.

Keep praying. Maintain contact if you can. Remember Jesus' desire that his father's house should be filled.

[7 : 19] But this morning, I want us to focus on another part of this story. Remember how the parable begins in verse 11.

There was a man who had two sons. And the second son, we know him as the older brother, he appears from verse 25 to the end of the chapter.

And after the high drama, the deep emotion, and the happy ending for the father and the younger son, this last episode can seem very much like an anticlimax, no?

Do we really need this jarring note? Well, we might think so. But Jesus told the whole story.

Jesus, the all-knowing son of God, he told the whole story, not just part of it, with a deliberate purpose.

[8 : 31] Look at the audience that he's addressing in verse 1 of this chapter. Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering to hear him.

They were people who had messed up their lives in different ways, who were despised as worthless by the other part of the audience that day.

And you read about them in verse 2. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered in disagreement. The religious leaders of the day.

For the sinners, the people called sinners and to wear in different ways. Some of them very great sinners. For the sinners, Jesus tells the three stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son.

And in effect, he says, that they, through trusting in him, they in effect are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

[9 : 47] But what about the other folk who were listening? The religious leaders? Well, they figure in the story as well. And you can be quite sure that they understood the point very well indeed.

They were the religious, self-satisfied older brother, excluding themselves by their pride from the father's house.

So it's no wonder that we read in various parts of the Gospels that after listening to stories like these, they were furious and sought opportunity to arrest Jesus and put him to death.

Well, there are younger sons today. Younger sons and daughters. There are also older sons and daughters.

And since, in Jesus' parable here, since these older sons and daughters are found in religious circles, as was, at least by implication, the older son, we need to listen.

[11 : 01] Because we are in a religious context. We are worshipping people, whatever any of us may be thinking in our own minds. So we need to listen and hold up this mirror of God's word to ourselves and our own lives.

And so let's read again verses 25 to 32 and then look more closely at this older brother. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

[12:25] My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. 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. This morning, it's not just the human interest that you have in this story. Two very different sons and how they're related to their father. And we could use this as a very interesting psychological investigation and apply it, no doubt, to families that we know.

But it's not just that. That has its value. But it is something far greater. It is the presentation here of the living God and how we, created by him, his sons and daughters by creation, how we relate to him.

So, how did this older brother relate to the father, relate to the family, and ultimately relate to God? I'd suggest that there are various aspects of his life that we can probe today.

[13:40] First of all, this man had an outward religion. He had an outward religion. If you put the two fellows, the younger and the older son, if you put them alongside, we would say that one of them was religious, but the other one wasn't.

It's quite obvious that the younger son, he threw off all restraint. And you can be quite sure when he left his father's home with all that money jingling in his pockets and he got to the far country, that he forgot all about the commandments of God.

Honor your father and mother, God's law says. Well, the old buddy-daddy back there home, I've got the money in my pocket. Who cares about him? You shall not covet.

Well, that's exactly what he did and he was going to keep on coveting. You can go through the commandments. We know the Ten Commandments and though he may not have disobeyed them all outwardly, he certainly was no longer a man who was following in the ways of God.

He had no religion at that time, either outward or inward. But look at the other man, the older brother. He was clearly a decent citizen.

[15:09] He was hardworking. He respected his parents. And although the story doesn't tell us, my guess would be that on the Sabbath day, he would be there in the synagogue.

He would be taking part respectably in public worship, listening to God's Word. And it may very well be the descriptions that Jesus gives of other people who are included in verse one, the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, very religious people, that they applied to this older brother in the story. Remember the man who said proudly as he stood up in his church in the synagogue and in the temple it was, and said, I fast twice in the week.

I give tithes, a tenth part of all that I have. I give to God and to the poor. He was a clearly, outwardly, a religious man.

God's love. But what a contrast between the outside and the inside. Think of his attitude to his brother and his father.

[16:27] Resentful. Resentful because, well, he despised his younger brother and basically in his heart there was no true godly respect for his father.

Again, he would probably fit the description that you have in a couple of chapters further on where Jesus talks of someone who thought himself righteous and looked down on others.

Or, he would be well described in the words of the prophet Isaiah where God, speaking through the prophet, describes some of his people, all too many of them, sadly, as, this people worship me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

Now, we've got to remember that that kind of deliberate hypocrisy that the people in verse 1, the people a couple of chapters further on, when Jesus describes as considering themselves righteous and despising others, that such deliberate hypocrisy is not always a characteristic of those who have an outward but not an inward faith or religious practice.

You think of Nicodemus in John chapter 3, a man of standing in the religious world of his day. He was a master, a teacher in Israel, and we can be quite sure that Nicodemus genuinely sought to fulfill all the rituals and all the practices of his Jewish religion.

[18:11] And yet, Jesus puts the finger on his heart and says, Nicodemus, the central thing you don't know. You must be born again. You must enter into a new relationship with God that doesn't depend on the things you do, on the outward things of your religion, but on something inward, on God's work, God's presence in your heart.

And of course, bringing it up to date. Undoubtedly, we can think of people in our own society, some who, like his older brother, they've not been like the prodigal, thrown overboard everything.

They are living even religious lives. They might be very well in some of our own churches, always keeping up the church connection.

They feel it's the right thing to do. They would tell us that, well, I've been brought up that way, and so I'm going to follow those Christian practices, or the way my church does it.

and after all, it does keep society together. I remember listening, perhaps two or three years ago, to an interview on the radio with Lady P.D.

[19 : 42] James, the famous detective writer, and the interviewer asked her about her personal beliefs, and she spoke out very strongly in favor of the Church of England, and she was obviously a loyal member of the Church of England, and she loved their liturgy, especially the traditional type.

she loved the old prayer book, and the old version of the Bible, the authorized version, and a great deal of the ceremonies of the Church of England.

The interviewer probed her a little further, and she was quite willing to say what he asked her to. He went on to ask her about her beliefs, but can you really believe what the Church teaches?

Now, I don't remember the specific doctrines that were referred to, but I'm pretty sure it would have been things like the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that there will be a final judgment that heaven and hell are realities, and P.D.

Jane made very clear that these things, no, I can't believe them. And when she was asked, well, why are you such a loyal supporter of the Church, she spoke very strongly, very eloquently about the long tradition of the Church, about the continuity that it represented.

[21 : 33] Think of it, 1,500 years the Church has been there and has maintained the standards, the moral standards. It has given us a sense of something outside ourselves.

That may be in a measure what some of these people had, what this older brother had, but friends, the problem with an outward religion is that when the crisis arrives, it collapses.

You're told that you have a terminal oneness, out of the blue, six months, a year to live, and all the words that you seem to believe, and the prayers, and the Church, it just doesn't seem to bring anything to you.

Indeed, you're tempted to say, well, why does God allow this? Where is God's justice? Where is God's love? Because if our faith, our religion, is just an outward thing, it's only a shell, and can bring no comfort in the hour of crisis, or it may be a financial problem, a financial crash that many are familiar with in these days of recession.

your shares have lost their value, your pension's not going to be there, you've lost your job, and suddenly your comfortable lifestyle is shattered.

[23 : 10] Of what then? Of the supposed faith that you possess. Wasn't Jesus right to end the Sermon on the Mount with a story of the two men?

one who, he said, did not hear my words, or put them into practice, and he built his house but on the sand.

When the floods came, and the winds blew, and the rains fell, and beat on that house, it collapsed, because it was built upon the sand.

But as the other man had a foundation, foundation, and that's exactly what this man lacked, a foundation, and a true knowledge of, a true repentance towards, a true faith in God, as we know through our Lord Jesus Christ, and what he has done in Calvary.

So the older brother had an outward religion, he also had, secondly, a self-righteous religion. Listen to his language. He says, there in verse 29, all these years I've been slaving for you, and what do I get out of it?

[24 : 34] He, that son of yours, he got all the property and he squandered it, and I've got nothing, although I'm slaving away. Actually, we've no time to go into it this morning, but if you look up Deuteronomy 21, verse 17, when you get home, you'll find that by, according to Jewish law, he as the older brother already had a sure guarantee of two thirds of the property as the older son, and it was guaranteed by law.

But here he is, building up his own merit. I'm doing this, I'm doing that, and what do I get out of it? Go on and look at his language, see the implications in it.

I have never disobeyed your orders, he did, he squandered all your property, I didn't, building up merit for himself in the sight of God.

And he knew nothing of what the Old Testament teaches clearly, but Jesus also taught, and Paul has set out so clearly when he says that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

As you go through the whole Bible, you find that there are two fundamental questions with regard to you and me and how we should live. The first is this, God is holy, how can I please him?

[26 : 03] And the other, God is distant, how can I reach him? God is of pure eyes and to behold sin.

He cannot look on iniquity. But I'm not like that. I may not be as bad as someone else, but I'm a sinner. And how can I please, how can I live up to the standards of a holy, righteous God? And God, well, God is the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent one, the creator of the ends of the earth, and here am I, made from the dust, so small, so insignificant.

He's so far away, I'm here, how can I reach him? And then, when you go through the Bible, you'll find that there are basically two answers that people give, and they still give till today.

And one is, I can answer these things by what I do. I can please him by what I do, I can reach him by what I do. Or, again, the other answer is, by what God has done, not by my efforts, but by what God has already done in his grace.

[27 : 10] And the older brother, no doubt, and the people in verse 1, or verse 2, rather, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you can hear the echo of what they would feel and say in words, for example, like those of the prophet Micah, which you have in chapter 6, verse 7.

What can I do?

I'll do this, I'll do that, I'll do more than the next man. I'll be more religious than my neighbor, I'll be more charitable to those around me in need, and God's word says, some of these things may be very good in themselves, but they will never, never gain for you acceptance before God.

Paul describes such an attempt as going about to establish our own righteousness. The problem is, friends, it's never, never enough.

And that's so hard to accept. Saul of Tarsus, such a religious man, he couldn't accept it until God met him on that Damascus road.

[28 : 41] The older brother couldn't accept it. God says, and when God says, that all our righteousnesses are filthy rags and can gain us no merit, as this young man or this older brother sought to do, I've slaved, I've done this, I've done that.

And God says, no. Augustus, top lid, he puts it well in his famous hymn, Rock of Ages, not the labors of my hand can fulfill thy law's demands.

Could my tears forever flow? Could my zeal no respite know? All for sin cannot atone. Thou must save and thou alone.

There's an outward religion. There's a self-righteous religion. And just one other thing briefly, and it's highly important.

The older brother, he had a loveless religion. There was no love in it. You know, Jesus was a master storyteller and when he describes the contrast in the two scenes here, it's amazingly powerful.

[30 : 11] Inside the house, you have the feasting, the dancing, the laughing, the singing. Outside, just on the other side of the door, is this fellow, solemn and alone.

And there's a world, an eternity of difference between the two. He really hated the man that he couldn't bring to call, bring himself to call my brother, this your son.

He's bitter to his father. And here he is, totally unwilling to say, with the brother who had come back, I have sinned, and I'm not worthy to be called your son.

A heart filled with bitterness and with hatred. Yes, the other brother had been everything he shouldn't have been, but by God's grace, he had repented.

And God looks not in the outward appearance, but on the heart. Not glossing over sin, but forgiving it for the sake, because Jesus tells the story and he knows what's around the corner for him, his atonement on the cross of Calvary, for the sake of and through the work of his beloved son on Calvary's cross.

[31 : 39] And at the heart of any true religion, there must be love. God's love to you and me, my love, which is not natural, but is given to us through Jesus Christ, to him and then to others.

He loved me and gave himself for me. Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ, that we should be called the children of God.

So there are two sons, the younger and the older, brother. We see what happened to both of them. I wonder if you've asked, I often have, how did the story end?

Did the younger brother continue well in the father's house, obedient now? I'm sure he did.

Of course it's just a story that Jesus told to illustrate his point. Did the older brother change? Well, when you think of the words that were spoken to and his father pleaded with them.

[33 : 03] His father said, look, you're always with me. All that I have is yours. And so as here this morning as we close, I know that in the church this morning there are younger brothers and sisters, older brothers and sisters, some who have been brought by the ways that you yourselves know, brought back to God.

But it is true that one can be in a place of worship as these people were to whom Jesus told the story and still it's only outward, it's self righteous, it's loveless.

But the father of the story, if that perhaps should describe you, whatever you may be outwardly, he's the one who says, he pleads and he offers new life, true new life in Jesus Christ as you repent and believe in him.

Let's bow in prayer. Amen.