

City on a Hill- The Gospel for Sinners and Saints
Luke 15:1-2, 11-32, 2/17/2019

Start with Scripture Reading (Kyle Benson) and Prayer

Have you ever been in a spiritual conversation and had someone say, "Christianity, is nice for people who need religion but that's just not for me." The implication is that Christianity is a religion that merely helps us cope with life, clear our conscience or give us order... certainly it does these things, but at the heart of Christianity, as we will see today, is not religion...quite the opposite actually. This amazing story we just read demonstrates that the gospel is for everyone- sinners AND for saints. It is for the moral and the immoral, the religious and the non-religious. About 10 years ago I was greatly impacted by a book by Dr. Tim Keller called, **The Prodigal God**. This book reshaped not only how I understood this famous story but how I understood the fundamental problem with the way humans try to connect with God. Much of what I share in this message today has been influenced by this book, and has changed how I approach sharing the gospel, which is why I want us to study this parable today.

For centuries this story was called prodigal son...but it should be prodigal sons because it tells the story of not one lost son, but two. The story is told over two Acts.

Act I- The Lost Younger Brother

Younger brother comes to the Father and says, "give me my share of the estate." The hearers of this story in 1st Century Middle East would have been shocked by such request. This is not, Dad- can I have a loan for a down payment on a house...If you have an estate, and have two sons 2/3s of estate would be inherited by the firstborn, 1/3 for younger. Of course, this happened when father died. One scholar says, "To ask for the inheritance when the father was still alive is to wish him dead. It would be like saying, I want your stuff but I don't want you." You are a means to an end, and I'm tired of it. I want it now.

But the hearers would have been even more astonished at the response of the father. An ancient middle eastern shame/honor culture, the father would have driven this son out of town, he would have brought shame upon the family name, he would have been exiled to receive nothing. But this isn't what this father did. He divided his property and gave it to him. This is more than just getting some money in a bank account...it was his estate and he would have to sell off land. The way he responded was unheard of. It is a portrait of a father who endured the rejection of his love with incredible longsuffering and meekness. A love that could be considered reckless.

Of course, the son lives like a Rockstar...Until he comes down to his last dime and ends up with the pigs. You know it's bad when you envy pigs right? He decides that he should go back, say he sinned, and become a hired hand, learn a trade. What was his thought? What the son was going to do was try to make restitute. Pay off the father for all the things he's done. Maybe, just maybe he will accept me...not as a son, but as a worker if I try to pay off my debts. And that would be beyond generous and gracious in his mind.

Father saw him while he was far off... and he ran. Middle eastern patriarchs didn't run. Women did, children...but it would have been undignified. And he embraces him, plants a big kiss on him. The portrait would have been much more of what would have been expected of a mother than a father...like those videos of a soldier surprising his mom. The son tries to roll out his restitution plan...father wouldn't even let him finish. Cuts him off... He didn't even wait for him to clean up and get a bath from hanging with pigs, and doesn't wait to gain approval. He says, "I'm going to get the best robe. My best ring. You can't earn your way back, you will not be a hired hand, I'm going to make you my son. I'm going to cover my son's nakedness and rags. I'm going to throw a huge party, kill the fatted calf" Wow, what revolutionary unconditional love and forgiveness? Stunning. We often end the story here and say God loves all you sinners out there. But the story is far from over because there are two prodigal sons.

Act II The Lost Elder Brother.

Elder brother hears about his younger brother's return and is furious. He is particularly upset about the cost. There is a big deal made of the calf... and you are thinking, what is the big deal about a calf? "I know this is important but I don't know why." Middle eastern people almost never have meat for a meal. It is a delicacy. True for much of the world outside of the west by the way. Most expensive would have been the fatted calf. It would not only have been an expensive party, everyone in the village would have been invited. He refuses to come into the party, which would have publicly humiliated the father. And so the Father leaves the party and goes out to him. And the son gives it to him...basically says "How dare you use your wealth recklessly. I should have a say over your stuff, I should have a right over your things because I have obeyed you. YOU OWE ME!" After the Father's tender, gracious response...after we are brought to the edge of our seat in the story, after we ask will the family be reunited? And live happily ever after? The Story ends there. Cliffhanger. we don't have closure... what is Jesus trying to tell us?

In this one parable, Jesus Radically Redefines God, Sin and Salvation

Jesus Radically Redefines God

One time a young woman came to me after a service struggling with shame and struggling to imagine that God could love her. The problem is she kept hearing father and she had a father that only loved her when she did right, she only experienced his love when she lived up to his expectations. There are many people who struggle with the idea that God as Father. Some who think of Father as patriarchal and harsh and ruling and controlling. Or a father that was angry and cold and distracted. But the picture of this Father is radically different. His emotional abandon, his tenderness, his willingness to receive the agony of rejected love. His extravagance and borderline reckless use of his wealth for someone so undeserving...For all of his power and majesty he is long suffering and patient and tender. He loves you and longs to be with you. No one ever described God quite like this way before Jesus. How do you see God?

Jesus Radically Redefines Sin

The first act is a picture of sin that is traditional. Everyone looks at this as sin. Prostitutes, rebellion, insulting his father, pig slop, down in the gutter. Self-indulgent... that's sin.

But in the second act- he turns the table. One is very, very good and obedient and the other is very very bad and rebellious and both of them are alienated from the father's heart. But they had more in common than you might think. Each of them wanted the father's things but not the father. Each of them used the father to get what they really loved. They didn't love the father, they loved the status, the wealth...but they did it differently, one through being very good and one through being bad. They are both lost, one lost in his badness and one lost in his goodness. And in the end, the one that is saved is the rebellious one and not the good one, as far as we know. The man of morality is lost, and the rebel was saved. And it gets worse, the man of goodness wasn't lost in spite of his goodness but because of it. "I have never disobeyed him." It's not his sins in the traditional sense... It's his greater sin, his self-righteousness, self-justification.

The reason we read the first two verses is because it told us who was around Jesus when he shared this story. Remember who he was speaking to when this parable is read? Tax-collectors and sinners, and Pharisees and teachers of the law...all of a sudden you realize who they are. Tax-collectors and Sinners- Younger brother. Religious people- the elder brother. These are the two ways humans try to make the world right, put themselves together to be right with God. What Tim Keller Calls- Moral conformity and Self-discovery. Moral Conformity- Johnny Cash- I walk the Line- I'm not going to do what I want to do, I'm going to comply and submit, 10 commandments, and work hard to be self-sufficient and righteous. Self-discovery- Frank Sinatra...I did it my way. I'm going to decide what is right for me, live how I want to live, indulge my desires, find my true-self and make that my identity apart from God.

Look around. Do you see what lies at the heart of our sin problem? Default mode of every human heart is self-justification. Being your own savior. Why do you obey God? To Get what I want from God...Or why do you disobey God? I don't want anyone telling me how to live. Both get to the heart of what alienates us from God.

Jesus Radically Redefines Salvation:

Salvation is not found in moral conformity, salvation is not found in self-discovery. From this parable, Jesus says we need three things to be saved:

- 1) **We need the initiating love of the Father.** Notice, it is the Father who goes out to both sons to bring them in. He kisses the young brother before he even repents. But he goes out to the older brother too... And he is speaking to the Pharisees...who he knows are going to be the ones who kill him. He seeks us first. And if you don't know him, he is seeking you right now.
- 2) **We need to repent of our deeper sin problem.** Have you come to see your utter inability to fix yourself, make yourself right? Christians are people who are more sinful then they ever dared believe and at the same time, in Jesus, are loved and accepted more than they ever dared imagine.

- 3) **You need to embrace what it cost to bring you home.** What made the younger son so angry? The father was spending recklessly on the undeserving younger brother, at the elder brother's expense! The young brother could only be brought in by the enormous cost of the elder brother. Someone has to pay, it's not free. Why does Jesus put in such a nasty elder brother? Because he is showing the Pharisees what they look like. But what would a true elder brother have done? He would have seen the agony of the father and say, "Father, I'm going to go out and look for my brother. And if he has gone out and ruined his life and squandered his inheritance, I will bring him home at my own expense." The younger brother didn't have a true elder brother. But we do! Jesus Christ, who tells the parable, is the true elder brother. He is the shepherd who leaves the 99 to look for the one. He is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He gives us a bad elder brother so we will long for the true one. In Jesus, we have one who has left his home in heaven to come and find us. In Jesus, we have one who purchased us at the expense of his own life. On the cross, Jesus was stripped naked so that we would be clothed with a robe of honor we don't deserve. There he paid the debt we owe. Everything he had, he shares with us. To the degree you see that, if the Holy Spirit opens your spiritual eyes to see this, you will be changed, you will not be able to live the same again. Because the Christian lives for Christ because of what he has done for us!

Takeaways:

1) You have a new lens to see the world. The "moral conformists" divide the world like this, good people are in and the bad people are out. And the younger brothers, the "self-discovery" types divide the world into two as well. The open-minded, free people who want to live however they want and discover what is right for themselves are in and the close-minded, bigoted, religious people are out. Jesus said neither.

Instead he says the humble are in and the proud are out. The people who know they aren't good or open-minded and need sheer grace are in. It's not religious or irreligious, it's not moral or immoral, it not half way in the middle...it's something else completely- it is sheer grace in the gospel of Jesus. Christianity is not another religion to cope. It is the way to a relationship with God.

Who are the sinners and the saints, who are the religious and irreligious, who are the moralist and hedonists that you encounter at home, at work, in your community? As lights for the gospel, as a city on a hill- how might you approach a conversation with each differently because of this parable? Why do you try to be good and obey? Why do you reject religion?

2) You have a new lens to see yourself. In this parable, we should be asking the question, are we more like the younger or older brother? To those that see themselves as the younger brothers, are you running from God, are you running from his rules or from what you perceive as his wrath? Do you think that you have done too many bad things that the father can't love you? Do you need to reimagine your view of God as the father, who comes out each morning to see if you have come home? Are you ready to come home to a father who holds no grudges?

If you see yourself as the elder brother. You are mad at people who hurt you, you judge people that are not like you and you are the good one and angry at people who aren't. You get angry at God when you have been good and God isn't giving you what you want. When you sin, do you find yourself either justifying yourself by your goodness or trying to clean yourself up through penitence so that God has to accept you? Are you unwilling to see your self-righteousness? Your goodness is the problem. Are you ready to lay your deadly goodness down and stand in Jesus alone?

The Father is running to you, the true elder brother- Jesus has rescued you at his own expense. Will you embrace their love for you?