

Sermon Notes, April 17, 2016
The Lost Sons, Luke 15:11-32

We're back to our series on the Prodigal Son, or more aptly, the Prodigal Sons. Why come back to this? It's because it is all about the mission of Jesus! What is the mission of Jesus? We said that how we answer that question will dramatically impact what our church looks like. And what you will do with your life. What is the mission of Jesus? Is it to make people a little nicer? Is it to make me feel better about myself?

In Luke 5 Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector. He leaves everything and follows Jesus. Levi (Matthew) says, "I want to have a bunch of my friends over to meet you." There are all sorts of sinners and tax collectors there with Jesus. Again the Pharisees grumble at Him. They say, "You're eating with sinners and tax collectors." And Jesus says, "*I have not come to call the righteous. I have not come to call those who think they are so sure of themselves that they don't need a savior. I've come to call sinners to repentance.*"

That's Jesus' mission. We're going to see this played out in this parable! The mission of Jesus—to seek and to save the lost. We're looking at the experience and the lessons of the younger son, the rebellious one, looking at that road to rebellion and then the road back to acceptance, forgiveness, to rebirth and new life.

It's a great mistake to think this parable is a story about one son. You are meant to compare and contrast the two sons. If you don't compare and contrast them the way Jesus wants you to, you're going to miss the radical message of this parable, and it is radical. Why did Jesus tell this parable? Jesus is saying that every thought the human race has ever had about how to connect to God, whether East or West, whether in the ancient, modern, or post-modern era, in every religion, in all secular thought, has been wrong. Jesus is here to shatter all existing human categories that we human beings have for our understanding of our relationship with God.

Some people have what you might call a *moralistic grid or view of life*. This view of life says, "*The problem with the world is not me; it's them, those immoral types.*" Remember, Jesus is eating with those "sinners." You have another kind of person whose worldview is what we could call, not a moralistic grid or view of life, but let's call it a *progressive grid or view of life*. The progressive view says, "*The problem with the world isn't me; it's them, those condemning types. I need to get away from them.*"

When Jesus Christ tells us about these two brothers, He is coming at us and saying, "*Neither of these paradigms, neither of these understandings or categories work...*" Whenever you read about the religious scene today, these two are always pitted against each other. Jesus says, "*Look carefully at these two brothers. They are both lost. Both are alienated from the father's heart.*" The father has two sons and what this is telling us is both a moralist and a progressive are equally alienated from the Father.

This story is so absolutely complete. It blows everything away. It says, "*There's another way. The gospel is a whole different way. It's not something any human being ever came up with. You're not going to read about it. You have to get it from Jesus.*" We need this because in almost every person, when we look in our own hearts, we see both a Pharisee and a prodigal. This younger son's journey is one of rebellion against the father, and obviously against God. It is a life that is self-centered and self-seeking.

1. The first sign that gives evidence of the son's heart and his rebellion is A DEATH WISH.

Kenneth Bailey, a New Testament scholar, grew up in the Middle East and knows the culture of the Middle East intimately. He's asked a broad range of Middle Easterners about this opening scene, what it means, what the significance is. He said almost without exception, first of all they are stunned because nothing like this would ever happen. And secondly, they all say the same thing, it is a death wish.

This particular parable, as famous as it is, is often not understood to be what it is, which is a story about the meltdown of community and the restoration of it. The family, which is the most basic human community, has unraveled in this story. The family is unraveling, but that's not the only community that's unraveling, because, this young man, who is an Israelite, goes off into a foreign country. At the very end, before he returns, he is feeding pigs. This means he has also repudiated his nation & his faith community. Bailey says the son's act, "is the heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part."

The younger son is saying, "I want your stuff, but I don't want you. My relationship with you has just been a means to an end. I will live my life as I choose how to live it, independent of you!"

Here we learn something critical about sin. The first thing we realize, by looking at this younger son, is *the nature of sin is essentially running from God in order to control his life*. Let's open it up. We begin to understand what sin is. It's not so much a violation of a rule; it's running from God in order to get control of your life. Sin is, underneath everything else, a desire not so much to break the rules. It's to use the rules Either breaking them or keeping them, you're using the rules. By breaking or keeping them, there's really no difference. Sin is to do whatever it takes to be able to say, "*God, I'm in charge of my life. I'm my own judge. I'm my own master. You cannot tell me how to live my life.*"

Here's what is so interesting. Of all the stories Jesus Christ could have possibly come up with in order to show us the essence of sin, He didn't come up with a murderer or a rapist or a thief. He came up with somebody who said, "Father, give me my life and just leave me the heck alone."

But here's the thing. There is nothing illegal about this. He wasn't breaking a rule. He wasn't violating a law. Do you know what the real problem is? It was not a violation of a law. It was relational. It was the shattered and broken relationship. It's independence. He didn't want the father to tell him what to do. The reason this is so critical is, unless you understand the essence of sin is it's not breaking a law, but it's breaking a law or keeping a law in order to say, "I have control."

The elder brother is also shaming the father by quarreling with him in public. He is also saying that he wished the father was dead

so he could use the property as he wished. Look. The elder brother says to the father, "I have obeyed you, and because I've obeyed you, I want to control the property my way." The younger son was trying to get control by leaving and disobeying, and the elder brother was trying to get control by staying and obeying, and they're both lost, they're both alienated from the father, and they're both saying, "I would like your things, but I don't want you." That's the essence of what sin is.

2. There's a second sign along the way in this son's active rebellion. It is THE DEATH OF A DREAM.

The younger son thought, as we all think, "I can do this. This is the best thing that's ever happened to me." In the process he's going to put his father's name, his memory, his values, and his faith out of his life. He's going to prove one way or another that he doesn't need his father. He doesn't need God. He doesn't need anybody, for that matter.

Now, oftentimes God doesn't do anything. (Paul writes about this in Romans 1 where he says that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven in just that. His wrath is revealed in giving us over to all kinds of sinful desires and appetites and in that we begin the steady downward spiral of sin.) Look how that is played out in the prodigal's life. We presume upon the silence and passivity of God that there are no consequences.

This son's dreams died hard. Life had not worked out. In fact, life had become a nightmare. He ends up with nothing. He has nothing. He wakes up to find himself and the life that he has carved out in his own way nothing but a disaster. And yet, here again is the obvious theme. It is that God seeks out sinners. My brothers and sisters, we must realize that there is One seeking much more than any one of us. God is seeking people who are lost only to be found by Him. God is still involved, intricately, intimately involved even in the disasters of life, allowing this younger son (and us) to go through the pain and despair and suffering that life can bring his (and our) way and through that to bring us to Himself.

Now, whether we're talking about the elder son, or the prodigal, here's what we see. Jesus is telling us here something that everybody wants to know today. He's talking to us about an experience of God. How do you have an experience of the Father? How do you get the Father's kiss, verse 20?

3. Another sign on this road of rebellion and this road to forgiveness and rebirth: IT'S THE DEATH OF SELF. Or to put it another way, you have to come to your senses.

Even though this son had reached a new depth (eating with the pigs), before he experienced that "death," he had to deal with some things he still had not come to terms with. He actually was not at the end of his rope—not yet. Kenneth Bailey says the reality is that the younger son was mostly concerned about not starving. So he decides to appeal to his father to be accepted as a hired hand. So he plans to make a "very humble speech" that would convince his father to take him back.

So we're not quite done, because the key to it all is seeing, not so much what the younger son did do, but what he didn't. Notice. "Make me like one of your hired men." Now a domestic servant was someone who actually lived on the estate. You know, he had room and board there, but a hired man was someone who lived in the town and who was a day worker and who was paid a wage. Do you know what he's doing? He says, "*Father, I know I've sinned. Father, I know I've done wrong, but I don't want your mercy. I don't want your grace. I want to earn my way back into the family.*"

Now, if the father in this story is God, then the younger son's approach to repentance toward God is the biggest mistake you can make. Here's why. Keep this in mind: religion vs. gospel. Religion is a framework of thought. It's a stance of life, it's a grid, a paradigm, it's an understanding of approach to God that says, "*If I have a good record, and if I do everything right, then God will bless me. If I have that good record, if I really live the life I ought to live, if I serve people, if I'm really moral and a good husband, wife, mother, father, son, or daughter ... If I have a good record, then God will bless me.*"

In that framework, what is the source of your power, your confidence, and your hope? That good record!

There are commentators that claim that this prodigal son is saved without a savior. There is no cross, no suffering, no savior. Not so! Look with me. The incarnation and the atonement are dramatically present in the story and form its first climax. The suffering of the cross was not primarily the physical torture but rather the agony of rejected love. It's vividly clear that in this parable the father endures such agony all through the estrangement! The very possibility of reconciliation is built on it.

A demonstration of the father's suffering *for him* must be witnessed by the son. Without this the son in his callousness will never discover the suffering of this father and will never understand that he is its cause. Without this visible demonstration the prodigal will return to the house as a hired hand. And though we can only speculate, it is more than likely he would gradually take on more and more of the characteristics of his older brother. Without this visible demonstration of costly love, there can be no reconciliation. Isn't this the story of the way of God as He deals with the sin of the world on Golgotha?

So how will the prodigal respond to this outpouring of costly love? How will you respond?

Jesus ... What did He do? When I think about it, it's pretty astounding that Jesus Christ told this story. What was He thinking when He tells the story of a young son who is in agony? A young son who is in rags, he's naked, he's crying out, and the father runs to him, receives him, enrobes him, and feasts him.

Yet at the end of Jesus' life, He cries out to *His* Father. He's stripped naked, in rags, as it were, on the cross, and He cries out, "My God! My God!" and what happens? The door is shut. He's not robed; He's disrobed. He's not feasted; He gets vinegar to drink. Jesus Christ on the cross was stripped naked for us so we could be clothed in God's love. He got the rejection we deserved so we get the welcome of God. Even before we repent, as this prodigal younger son is going to experience, God is on us, robing us, kissing us, and feasting us.