

The prodigal sons

INTRODUCTION

- Theologically, spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally this parable remains as remarkable and moving in the twenty-first century as it was for its first-century audience.
- And as it has charged and challenged and changed those who have heard it in every century in-between

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TO OUR CONDITON

- The “prodigal son” parable is both a headpiece for Jesus’ continuing teaching on the importance of true repentance.
- And an example of the height and depth of God’s forgiveness available to all who repent.

THE MADNESS OF SIN 1

- In Jesus' story the younger son says to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate."
- So the father divides his property between his two sons.
- And the younger one sets off for a distant country and there squanders his wealth in wild living.
- After all his wealth is gone there's a severe famine in the country.
- This young man's in trouble.

MADNESS OF SIN 11

- He's hungry.
- So he hires himself to a local farmer who sends him to his fields to feed pigs.
- Which is the worst job in the world for a good Jewish boy.
- He is so hungry, Luke tells us, he would gladly have eaten the pods that the pigs are eating.

BOTH SONS ESTRANGED FROM THE FATHER

- But the parable begins with these words: "There was a man who had two sons."
- There are two sons in this story.
- The parable makes the radical statement, especially radical for Jesus' time.
- That both sons were estranged from the father.
- One was a prodigal, and the other was righteous.
- One went into a far country, and the other one stayed home. But they are both distanced from the father.
- They are both alike. One is rebellious; the other is self-righteous

MADNESS OF SIN 111

- When the younger son demanded his inheritance, a monetary share of his father's property, before his father's death.
- The son's actions were radically unethical.
- The rules for inheritance were clearly spelled out in Numbers 27:8-11; 36:7-9 and Deuteronomy 21:17.
- It is only the compassion of this particular father that overrides established tradition.

THE PRODIGAL SONS

- On the other hand the sons are alike.
- They both want the same thing.
- They are rivals for the same thing
- Their behaviours, as different as they are, are caused by the same thing, this desperate need in their lives to hear the father's blessing.
- And that is the most radical assertion made in this parable.
- It shocked the people in Jesus' day--that prodigality and self-righteousness are symptoms of the same disease.

ALIENATED FROM GOD'S GRACE

- And the disease is called alienation from God.
- And the cure for both men is the same. It's grace.
- The tragedy of this story is that only one son realizes it.
- The older brother says, "I'm alright. There's nothing wrong with me. I stayed at home.
- I did what the father told me to do. Never did I even imagine I would do anything like the younger son did.
- So I'm different from my brother.

WORST DEGRADATION OF ALL

- The younger son went into a far country. If you know ancient Jewish culture, you know that already the son has broken the most inviolate taboo.
- The Jews would never leave the family and go into a Gentile country to live.
- They would be defiled, disgraced, and disowned.
- But we know it was a Gentile country in the story, because it says that there were pigs there.
- And that is the worst degradation of all.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF DEGRADATION

- There would never be pigs in a Jewish country.
- And the worst state of all is when the younger son finally, in desperation, has to tend the pigs.
- Which means, now he is banned, ostracized, shunned--forever.
- As far as any Jewish family in those days was concerned, the younger son is now dead.
- His memory erased from the family. He can never come home. Never.

LOST THROUGH WILLFULNESS

- The younger son goes from party boy to poverty stricken.
- The hospitality of the “distant country” did not extend to keeping foreigners in food during a famine.
- In a desperate attempt to stave off starving, the young man finds himself performing an unthinkable job for an observant Jew — tending swine.
- In Leviticus (11:7: 14:9) the uncleanness of eating, touching, even herding swine is clearly spelled out.

NO JOY FOR THE WICKED

- But for the younger son even this most horrible job doesn't take off of his desperate plight.
- He is still so constantly hungry that he would like to eat the unclean animal's food.
- The Gentile world tended to consider poverty as a kind of "just reward".
- The failures and those who suffered it, and saw alms-giving as pointless, not compassionate.

THE DEVIL IS A LIAR

- The younger son's employer offers him nothing in the way of compassionate interest or care.
- For whatever reason, one day the younger son "came to himself."
- He realized that even the day-labourers on his father's lands were better off than he was in his current situation.
- He decides to return to his homeland and his people, but assume that his shameful actions have made it impossible for him to fully return to his family.

GOD'S JOY

- And it was just given to him. Free. He was lost, and then found. "My son, who was dead, is now alive."
- That's why the older son is so enraged. "If anyone ever deserved a blessing," he said, "it's me."
- I worked hard for it, I sacrificed for it, I didn't go across the river into the fleshpots of a Gentile country.
- I never did that. I stayed in the culture in which I was raised. I never questioned it. I was always faithful to it.

CONSEQUENCE OF SELF RIGHTEOUSNESS

- And now, look what has happened. It's just disgusting, it's immoral, that's what this is, that my brother would be treated in such a way.”
- The father gives him the robe and the ring and the party.
- The older son refuses to join in the party.
- He is standing outside of the house, on the porch.
- The sound of partying from inside the house coming out.
- He has his back turned, looking out over the property that is supposed to be all his. He won't go in the house.

LOST THROUGH SELF RIGHTEOUSNESS

- You know what that means. It means that the porch has now become the far country.
- That's the point. The older son is revealing by his behaviour that he is as estranged from the father as is the younger son.
- He wants that blessing. He believes that he's earned it.
- It's what he wants more than anything else. And he didn't get it.
- His efforts did not result in it being rewarded to him. So he won't go in.

GOD REJOICES OVER THE SALVATION OF A SINNER

- But he comes home. And not only does he come home, but the father receives him.
- And not only does the father receive him, he blesses him, which is the meaning of placing the robe about his shoulders and the ring upon his finger and the shoes upon his feet, and having a party to celebrate his coming home.
- He now has received the one thing that all of us want more than anything else--the father's blessing.

LOST THROUGH HAUGHTINESS

- His story is so different from that of his brother.
- The elder brother didn't go into the far country.
- He didn't lose his inheritance, didn't live among pigs.
- He stayed home . . . did what was expected of him.

LOST THROUGH PRIDE

- But listen to how he responds to his brother's return: "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.'

OLDER SON CRITICAL NO COMPASSION

- “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!’”

BAD ATTITUDE OF OLDER BROTHER

- Notice how he refers to his relationship with his father.
- He says, “All these years I’ve been slaving for you.”
- Those are revealing words. Not “working for you” or “serving you” or “helping with the family farm.”
- No, he says he was “slaving for his father.”
- Notice how he refers to his brother:
- “But when this son of yours . . . comes home.”
- He can’t ever refer to him as his brother, but as “this son of yours.”

GOD IS THE GOD OF GRACE

- The father seeks to set him straight.
- “My son,” his father says, “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.”
- Notice that the father reminds the elder son, first of all, that the prodigal is his brother!
- Sometimes that happens to those who are so eager to condemn those who are weaker and have given into temptation. They are still our brothers and sisters.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF JOYLESSNESS

- The elder son peers with critical eyes and a cold unforgiving heart at both his brother who has broken all the rules and his father, so eager to welcome his wayward son back home.
- The elder brother is spiteful, angry, resentful.
- And some of us understand that.
- We sometimes wonder why God bends over backward to welcome back the wayward
- GOD seems to ignore those of us who have always played by the rulebook

- It is hard for us to accept that Jesus sees more hope in the much-deserved humility of the prodigal than the self-righteous indignation of his brother.
- And yet it is important that we do hear Jesus' message.
- We sometimes read this parable and consign the elder brother to the supporting cast, a minor character in the narrative.
- The truth is, Jesus may have intended for him to be the central character in the story

AMAZING OBSERVATIONS OF CHRIST ENEMIES

- Remember who Jesus is telling this parable to.
- It is the religious leaders of the day.
- The first two verses of the chapter tell us that.
- We read, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.
- But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” LUKE 15:1-2

CHRIST STILL SEEKS SINNERS

- The story of the prodigal is intended to give hope to the tax collectors and the sinners.
- But it is a devastating judgment on the attitudes and actions of the scribes and Pharisees.
- For you see, they are the elder brother in Jesus' parable keeping the Law, but looking with disdain upon those not as righteous as they.
- And friends, that is how the church appears to many people in our society today.

LOST TO THE PURPOSE OF JESUS

- It has been said that if the prodigal had seen his brother before he saw his father, he might have returned to the pigpen.
- I wonder how your lifestyle and attitudes affect others.
- Do they attract people to Christ or drive them away?

CHRIST CAME TO SEEK & SAVE THE LOST

- Three characters: the penitent prodigal; his loving and gracious parent representing God; and his smug, self-righteous brother.
- If you are the prodigal, come home. It's not too late.
- If you are the elder brother, also please come home.
- I know it is harder for you to see your sin than it is for your weaker brother or your sister, but your sin of self-righteousness may be the most deadly sin of all.
- Come home to the waiting arms of the Father.

CONCLUSION

- My friends, you and I need to refocus our lives on God, whether we've strayed only a few baby steps away from God or whether we have taken our inheritance into the far country, the key to regaining our lives is to lose them in trusting God in all things.
- His grace is sufficient; His love is everlasting.
- Won't you come home to the Father's house?