**A Tale of Two Sons**

August 23, 2015

Luke 15:11-32

Key Verses 15:31,32 “‘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.’”

Last week we studied the first part of chapter 15. The first two stories, about the sheep and the coin, emphasize God as the seeker, the one who finds and the one who rejoices. Jesus said, “In the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.” All searching and rejoicing is not possible without repentance. In today’s passage we learn what repentance is. Although this is often called the parable of the lost son, the climax of the whole story is the older son. That is why I call it a tale of two sons. The story is often called the parable of the prodigal son. “Prodigal” means “excessive, extravagant, wasteful, squanderer.” The word prodigal usually describe the younger son who wasted his inheritance on lavish living. But we can see that the father was lavish in his forgiveness and acceptance of the younger son when he returned home. Jesus is teaching us the God of the Universe is like the father in this story. So we may call this story the parable of the prodigal father. May God help us to learn the heart of God.

Look at verse 11-12a. “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’” This is absolutely an outrageous statement. He is utterly disrespectful toward his father. He lacks any love for his father whatsoever. It is like saying, “Dad, I wish you were dead. You are in the way of my plans. I want my freedom, I want my fulfillment and I want out of this family now. I’ve got other plans, they don’t involve you, they don’t involve this family. I want nothing to do with any of you. I want my inheritance now.” In a culture where honor was so important, in a culture based upon the Ten Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother,” any son who made such an outrageous request from a healthy father would be slapped in the face, then very likely he would be shamed publicly. They may even have an official funeral for such insolence. That is why in verse 24 when he comes back, the father says, “This son of mine was dead.”

Look at verse 12b. “And he divided his property between them.” Rather than strike him across the face for his insolence, the father grants him what he wants. He extends to him this freedom because he is willing to endure the agony of rejected love. It was heartless, cruel and ungrateful, but legally the younger son could make such a request. So he is not really breaking the law, but he is demonstrating the absence of a relationship, breaking fellowship with him. Sin is more than breaking rules and laws. It is the breaking of a relationship.

The sinner has no relationship to God whatsoever. He doesn’t love God, doesn’t care about God, wants nothing to do with God, wants no accountability to God, wants no interest in God, doesn’t want to submit to God, doesn’t want any kind of relationship at all. In fact, he has none. And God in the agony of rejected love lets the sinner go. This is the foolishness of the sinner. He wants to get away from God, he wants to get away from God now. He wants no accountability to God. He sells cheap all of the opportunities that God has provided for him, all the good gifts, everything that is good that God has put into his world. All that goodness and patience of God that was meant to lead him into a relationship with God, he rejects and once he gets his cash, you see what happens in verse 13a, “He set off for a distant country.”

Look at verse 13. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.” The younger son probably did not intend to squander his wealth. He may have wanted to start a new dot.com business and become a successful entrepreneur using his share of the estate as his beginning capital. But something happened when he arrived in the distant country. People regarded him as mysterious and treated him well because he looked like a prince and had money. He began to enjoy the attention and respect he received. He was having such a good time. But he woke up one morning to find that his money was all spent.

Look at verse 14. “After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.” This young man did not understand the hardness of the world. He thought he had made many new friends and that people would like him forever. But when a famine overtook the land, the situation changed overnight. In order to survive and feed their own families, people became hardened. When the young man could not pay his hotel bill or his bar tab, no one would help him out. He was thrust into the street with empty pockets and a hungry stomach. Maybe he began to live in a cardboard box on the side of a street. He realized that he had to find a job. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his field to feed pigs. It was humiliating to a Jewish boy. But the most aggravating problem for this young man was not his public humiliation, it was his hungry stomach. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating. Maybe he began to fight with the pigs over the pods. As he rolled around in the mud, he felt he had become a pig.

Look at verse 17a. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s…’” Let’s stop there for a moment. All of a sudden his father comes to mind. I am sure he had done everything he could to make sure he kept his father out of mind while he was indulging himself. But now left with nothing, destitute, in a famine, dying of hunger, he comes to his senses. He has a conversation with himself. He said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!” And this is where repentance really begins; it begins with an accurate assessment of your condition. It is really important for the sinner to come to an honest assessment of his or her own situation. He knows he is in a situation for which he has no resources to get out. He knows he is dying of hunger and no one will give him anything and he is losing the battle with the pigs for what they can eat. It is the end. And all repentance begins with an honest assessment of one’s condition of destitution, helplessness, no resources, and impending death.

And so, he thinks about his father and how many of his father’s hired servants have more than enough bread while he is dying of hunger. The young man realized that his father was a good manager and a kind employer. For the first time, he began to respect his father. He began to realize his father’s love. He began to think that his father was the most wonderful man in the world. A great desire to go back to his father began to grow in his heart. His sensible thinking then moves his will. This is how repentance works. First of all, the sinner comes to his senses, begins to really look and assess where he is, and where he is headed, to the inevitable death and destruction and eternal damnation. The sinner says, “I can’t keep going this direction. There is the only one to whom I can turn, that is the Father whom I have rejected and dishonored. I have to go back to him. I have to go back, bearing my shame and full responsibility for my sin.” He trusts in his father’s goodness, compassion, generosity and mercy. Repentance is linked to faith.

He knows the kind of man his father is, and in spite of the horrible way he has blasphemed his father, dishonored his father, shamed his father, the horrible way he has treated his father, the terrible way he has lived his life, coming to the very bottom, he knows his father is a forgiving man and he trusts to go back and receive forgiveness, and do whatever works he needs to do to make restitution and be reconciled. He got up and went toward his father’s house. But it was not easy. Perhaps his heart sank as he came nearer his father’s house. He must have hesitated at the thought of passing before hometown people and his father’s servants, not to mention his brother.

Look at verse 20b. “But 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.” This shows that his father was waiting for him every day, looking for his son’s return. The father had undying hope for his son’s return. Why is he running? Simply, he wants to reach his son before his son reaches the village. He wants to protect him from the shame. He takes the scorn and the mockery and the slander so that his son doesn’t have to bear it. And then when he finally gets there, even more shockingly, he embraced him, and kissed him, even though he was stinking in dirty and ragged clothes. And now we know that the father has been suffering silently for the whole time he has been gone. The father loved his son so much that he emptied himself of any pride, of any honor and dignity. Do you want to know how eager God is to receive a sinner? He will run through the dirt and bear the shame, he will embrace the sinner with all his strength and plant kisses all over the sinner’s cheek. This is a gesture of acceptance, love, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation. And all of that before the son says one word.

Probably the son was in tears at his father’s embrace. He knelt down as he said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (21). He wanted to say more, but his father interrupted. Look at verse 22. “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” The robe covered his beggar’s garments and made him look like a prince. The ring was a sign of being an heir. The father accepted his son and clothed him with the honor and privilege of a son. What the father did stunned everyone including the younger son, especially the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. It was absolutely mind boggling to accept such a sinner as a son. They would have expected that when the younger son knelt down and begged for forgiveness, the father would say to him at best, “Look, okay, I want to forgive you, maybe it’s not going to take a lifetime of work, but I want to watch you for a year or two years and see what’s going on in your life and see if you’ve really repented and if you really mean that you want a restored relationship.” That would be an honorable thing. A social norm at that time was that if he ever wanted to come back, he would have to make payback the money he wasted. But the father accepted him fully as a son without any work. It is totally unbelievable. This is the glory of salvation. When the sinner comes bankrupt with absolutely nothing, cast himself on his father’s mercy, says, “I’ve wasted everything. My sin is as high as the heaven. I’ve sinned against God. I can offer you nothing. But I’m willing to work.” Then the father embraces him in love and says, “You don’t need to work. I give you full sonship with all rights and privileges, all honors.” That is gracious salvation. It gives God great joy. Verse 23 says, ‘Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.”

Look at verses 25-27. “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 received him back safe and sound.’” Why didn’t the father send a messenger to the older son and say, “Hey, your brother’s back and we’re going to have a party. Come, rejoice with me, and help me get this party started”? The answer is that the older has no relationship to the father. The father knows that he has no interest in his brother. He proved that at the beginning of the story when he didn’t try to stop his brother from doing what was terrible. He had no interest in his father. He proved that by not intervening between his brother and his father to stop his brother from such a dishonorable act toward his father. He never participated in the grief of his father. He is equally unloving, equally ungrateful even though he stays home. He is the hypocrite in the house. He has no relationship to anybody in the family. Being out in the field is sort of a metaphor for where he was in terms of that family. The younger son was in a distant country. This guy is in a far field. But the symbolism there is that they are both way off from the father. They both come home, but to very different receptions.

Look at verse 28. The older brother became very angry and refused to go in. He was self-righteous and legalistic. He did not know his father’s broken heart or his father’s joy at the younger son’s return. To him, the joyful celebration was a bitter event. The father pleaded with him, “My son, 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” (31,32). The older son was spiritually blind. He needed to realize his father’s love. He needed to understand the suffering of his younger brother. The father said to him, “we” had to celebrate. His father wanted him to rejoice over his younger brother’s return. So Jesus wanted the Pharisees to rejoice over the salvation of lost sinners instead of muttering. This is possible when we know the heart of God.

And it stops in verse 32. This is not an ending. What did the older son do? The guests are all there. They are waiting. They want to know if he humbled himself, if he fell down before his father, and sought grace for his long hypocrisy and bitter service. I think maybe the following ending would be good, “And the older son fell on his knees before his father saying, ‘I repent for my loveless cold service, my pride and selfishness. Forgive me, father, make me a true son, take me to the feast.’ At which point the father embraced and kissed him, took him in and seated him at his table by his brother, and all rejoiced in the sons who had been reconciled to their loving father.” That is not what happened. The Pharisees wrote the ending. Here’s the ending they wrote. “And the older son being outraged at his father, picked up a piece of wood and beat him to death in front of everyone.” And that’s what they did just a few months after this. By the way, they congratulated themselves on their righteous act that preserved the honor of Israel, true religion and God.

Whether you are estranged from God openly living in sin, or estranged from God living in hypocrisy, come to the prodigal Father who has borne shame for you, who is pleading with a hypocrite. This is our gracious and good God, who delights in mercy and finds his joy in forgiveness.