

## **The Waiting Father with His Two Sons**

Luke 15:1,2, 11-32

This morning I want us to meditate on one of the most well-known stories in the whole Bible. It is a story told by the greatest Storyteller of all time -- JESUS.

Crowds of people loved to hear His stories and His teaching. Most of them were from the nation who had been chosen to be God's people and yet who in Jesus' eyes were like sheep wandering without a shepherd. Lost and in need of someone to rescue them, to save them and to lead them back to their God.

This story is found in Luke chapter 15. The opening verses in this chapter give us some very important information. It tells us who were the ones to whom Jesus told this and other stories that day.

There were two kinds of people: "bad" people and "good" people. The "bad" people were the many tax collectors and sinners crowding around Jesus to listen to Him. And the "good" people were the religious leaders and the Pharisees.

Let's think for a moment about the "bad" people in his crowd that day: The tax collectors and "sinners". Tax collectors were Jews who collected the taxes for the Roman government. They were Jews, but they were a part of a hated system. They were from God's people but were seen to be working for God's enemies.

These people were dishonest with a reputation for making themselves rich by demanding high taxes. They were allowed to charge whatever they liked, as long as they met their obligations to the Roman authorities.

So they were very unpopular and hated by most. Perhaps we could liken them to the corrupt people in powerful and influential positions in the governments of the world today. People who can lie and cheat and seem to have it all their way, people despised by most "good" people including the religious people in society.

But isn't it interesting that these were the very people who came flocking to listen to Jesus? Why? I wonder! Was it not because they recognised in Jesus a reality, a depth of spiritual reality that they hadn't seen in the lives of their own religious leaders? Was it not that they found in Jesus -- not some a weak acceptance of their evil ways -- but rather a ray of hope, and a way out of the sinful traps they had become caught in? Whereas they had only experienced rejection from the priests and the other religious leaders. We can only believe that they saw something powerful and attractive in the Person of Jesus. He opened His heart to accept them as people, whereas they had suffered total rejection from their own leaders.

The other "bad" people who gathered around Jesus that day are called by Luke "sinners". Who do you think this referred to? Why would Luke use "sinners"? Wasn't everyone a sinner? Yes, but not everyone saw themselves as a "sinner". That was the bigger problem.

"Sinners" wore a label, a name that was frequently given to certain people in the society of Jesus' day because of their outward sinful behaviour -- the prostitutes, those who did not follow the Jewish laws and commandments -- who didn't have regard for the Sabbath Day. The "sinners" were the people like the woman of Samaria whom Jesus met one day at the well of Sychar.

If we think of "sinners" in our society today, we would probably think of those who sell or take drugs, those who seem to love a life of immorality, the prostitutes we sometimes see by the side of the roads looking for more "clients", or young people who have resorted to stealing -- possibly in order to survive because they have been put out of their homes by parents who don't care.

"Sinners" -- yes, these were the ones in the crowds that day who were standing closest to Jesus.

And then there were the "good" people according to Luke's Gospel -- the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. As they saw how these sinners were apparently a part of Jesus' circle of friends, they were displeased. They would have wanted Jesus to

follow their pattern of sending these sinners away. Then they could have had a religious debate or dialog with Jesus to discuss some of their traditions.

But Jesus hadn't come to make friends with the religious establishment, but to save His people from their sins.

Who were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? They were very influential groups within their whole society, leaders among the people of God, people who were respected for their good lives and their religious sincerity and zeal. People whose lives looked outwardly perfectly in good order. The Pharisees' name means "holy ones", people who had separated themselves from the world for God. People who were given places of high honour and respect in the Jewish society of Jesus' day.

And yet they were the ones to whom Jesus spoke some of His strongest words. And who helped to plan Jesus' death.

So here we have two groups of people to whom Jesus is about to tell some stories: The "bad" people, and the "good" people -- the sinners and the saints. Jesus had a message that day for both of them.

So we come to the story which is commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

This title is certainly not found in the text of the Bible. And is it even accurate? Let's ask ourselves the question: Who is the central figure in Jesus' story? Is it the wayward son? Or is the father? Perhaps this parable could be more accurately called -- THE PARABLE OF THE WAITING FATHER.

We all know this wonderful story so well. Jesus begins by telling how a wealthy landowner is one day confronted with the request of his younger son -- that his father give him the part of the inheritance that was his, instead of later after his death. Almost like wishing his father were dead according to the customs of that day.

Jesus goes on to say that the father does not keep back what is his son's by right.

Soon after the son leaves home and goes off to a faraway land where he wastes all his inheritance doing whatever he wanted to do -- following the evil cravings and desires of his heart. For a brief moment, he seemed to enjoy all the pleasures he indulged in, but it wasn't long before his wealth dried up. He was left in a hopeless and helpless condition.

From that point, it was down -- down -- down, right down (for a Jew) into the pits -- hiring himself out to feed pigs. The other day I was visiting a friend who keeps some pigs. I went in to see them -- but stayed inside for just a few seconds. The smell of a pig pen isn't all that beautiful!

But in that hopeless situation in the pig pen, this young man in his rags saw a ray of hope in the distance -- in his father's house. This ray of hope probably arose in his heart as he remembered who his father was -- the kind of person he knew his father was.

The memory of his father suddenly shone rays of light and sunshine into the dark of the prodigal's night. There and then he made the decision to return home and to offer himself up to his father to become one of his slaves. At least he thought, I will be near to my father and will have enough to eat.

So he returns home. What a beautiful picture we see painted by the words of Jesus -- of the father, waiting, looking and longing for the return of his son. Can we not assume that the father had never lost hope that one day his son would come to his senses and return home? And can we also not assume that his father knew that one day his son would grow sick of living away from his father's home and decide to come home?

Jesus says that one day the father noticed a ragged-looking young man finding his way up the dusty road towards his father's home. The father knew who it was. The day he had been longing for had finally come. The day when his lost son would be restored to his family.

He didn't wait until the son had walked through the gates. He ran down the road to lead the son home. And what a meeting that was. Can you see it? A father in his beautiful robes of honour hugging the son in his rags filled with pig dung. The father in his compassion embracing his son in his brokenness.

Here is one of the most beautiful scenes painted in the whole of Scripture to be sure. One of the most powerful pictures of the God whom we call "our Father".

And of course, we know all that follows in this story -- the loving welcome home, the acceptance by the father, the reinstating of the son to his father's household, the hearty celebration, the total absence of any condemning words spoken by the father to his younger son, but also the elder's brother's angry reaction and his choice to stay away from the celebration.

What was it that really upset the elder brother so badly? Was it not the fact that after all his good living, his hard work and faithfulness on the home front, the father hadn't given him a party? He thought he deserved so much for all the good things he had done, and yet the father had given a big party for a son who didn't deserve anything but a rebuke for all the wrongs he had done. It just wasn't fair.

Jesus' story ends with the father's words to his elder son: "My son . . . we should be glad and celebrate. You brother was dead, but he's now alive. He was lost and has now been found."

What was the heart of Jesus' teaching that day? Who the Father is -- what He is really like:

- He's a Father whose heart is overflowing with love and longing for those who are lost in their sin, for those with broken lives.
- Jesus' Father doesn't condemn or reject the repentant sinner but welcomes the sinner home.

- Jesus' Father celebrates with great joy when a lost son returns home to the Father and doesn't make even one mention of all the ways the son has hurt not only himself but also his father.
- Jesus' Father doesn't keep back from the son anything but showers upon him all the blessings of His home.

Wow! What an amazing truth! This is your Father. This is my Father in heaven.

How do you think this parable spoke to the tax collectors and sinners in Jesus' crowd that day? I am confident that some of them at least heard the call of the Father to return home -- to leave living in the pigsty of rebellion against God in order to enjoy the glory of living with the Father in His home.

What about us? Are there any "tax collectors" and "sinners" among us? People who have been living far from God? If so, I invite you to return to one and only God, the living God, your Saviour, the One who welcomes sinners who turn from their sin and come to Him for forgiveness. Come!

Here is also a message of encouragement and also instruction for parents of prodigals. Parents whose children were brought up in the faith but then who later walked away from the truth. How comforting to know that our God welcomes back sinners, no matter how far they have strayed away, no matter how deeply they have sunken into sin.

Is this something that is troubling your mind and heart this morning? Has your son or daughter gone off and left you feeling very hurt and sad?

May the picture of the waiting father guide you in the way you respond to your child - with loving acceptance rather than with bitterness, rejection or anger.

Come to God in fervent prayer asking Him to heal your spirit of the hurt and perhaps hatred towards your child.

- Ask Him to give you great patience as you sit by the window day after day, waiting and longing for the day when the child will return to their heavenly Father.
- Ask Him to give you enduring love for your child no matter what he or she may do, no matter how far they may go away from God.
- Ask God also to stir up within the child a true awareness of their lostness, and then the awareness of the God who came to save the lost.

Hold on, dear sister, dear brother. Don't give up! God is powerful. God is merciful. Put your trust in the living God who does His work on the inside of people's hearts, even when it appears to all outward appearance that they are hardened against God and His truth. Wait in expectancy and with a loving heart, ready to welcome the sinner home. God who sees your heart and your longing shares your pain and shares your longings.

But we cannot avoid seeking to understand the meaning of the darker side of the story. The elder brother in the story. Who was he among the people of Jesus' crowd that day?

Jesus' teaching about the elder brother spoke without doubt to the Pharisees and the religious leaders and teachers in His crowd that day. How many of them understood and recognised that they were indeed the elder brothers who were angry and waiting outside -- who refused to join in with the celebration?

No doubt this parable cut right into the heart of the Pharisees and religious leaders in the crowd that day.

- They were the so-called faithful preservers of the Jewish law, but they did not know the Father who had given the law and who had sent His Son to fulfill their law.
- They were zealous in carrying out their religious traditions, but these traditions not God had become the real centre of their worship.
- They taught the stories of Abraham, but they did not personally know the God of Abraham.

Probably many of these Pharisees and religious leaders went away very unhappy with Jesus' teaching, looking for an opportunity to destroy Jesus. We aren't told how they responded. But hopefully some of them went home and thought further about Jesus' message to them.

What message does the Spirit of God have for us through the responses of the elder brother? Could there be among us today some who have the heart of the elder brother? I believe -- not just some of us, but probably all of us, including myself are afflicted with the heart of the elder brother.

The elder brother had been so close to his father, yet in spirit he was so far away. He had been very faithful in carrying out his duties in his father's house, but his hard work was characterised by a spirit, by an attitude that reveals just how dark his heart was.

What was the elder brother's greatest problem? His problem was his blindness -- he was blind to the real condition of his heart. He talked about how faithful and hard-working he had been in contrast to how unfaithful his younger brother had been.

His problem was the evil condition of his heart. His heart was full of jealousy, full of his demands for fairness and justice, without mercy, self-righteous, self-centred, proud, judgmental, severe, harsh.

How tragic -- the one who had lived so close to his father hadn't caught the heart of his father.

It appears that though the father loved him just as much as he loved the wayward younger brother, the elder son didn't really love the father. He despised his father in his heart. He thought of his father as being more interested in celebrating with sinners than with people who did all the right things, who kept the law, who were so religiously perfect.

Does this not speak to all of us? To me and to you?

- How often our hearts are so cold towards the sinners around us.
- How quick we are to judge those who fall into sin, rather than seeking to restore them and help them with the love of our Father.
- How often we see ourselves as people who deserve God's kindness because we have been so faithful in our church work.
- How often we might even pray to God expecting Him to do us good in return for our having been good.
- And when God blesses some other people who appear to be less deserving than we are, how easy it is for us to become even slightly resentful towards God.

Is this not speaking about the hidden, real condition of your heart -- and my heart?

There isn't a person here today who doesn't have some of the heart of the elder brother in them. Including myself.

How profoundly God has spoken to me in recent weeks about this very issue in my own life. A believer since childhood, never having wandered away into a far country, keeping very busy for God, even appearing on the outside to be a man of God, and faithful in what he does.

And yet God has revealed to me that I have often thought like the elder brother -- that I have had the attitudes of the elder brother -- that I don't really see myself as a "sinner" in need of His grace. After all, I have been a believer for almost 50 years. But all this time, I have been looking mainly at the outward life. My actions have been considered "good" and "noble", sacrificial and faithful. But deep within my heart there were sins of the heart -- and also the secret sins behind the scenes -- the over-sensitive responses to people, the unkind words, and so on.

I had fallen into the trap of thinking like the elder brother that I was in a good condition because of the kind of life and work I was doing. But then the Spirit broke through to my heart and opened my mind to see how much there was in my heart (even in the motives for Christian ministry) that was not "holy" and right in His sight.

Jesus' message is simple and clear: Though we be outwardly religious and hard-working in the church, He looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart.

O let us pray and ask God that He will open our spiritual eyes to see that our sins -- yours and mine -- are not just in outward actions, but in the heart.

But just to know the true condition of our hearts is not our salvation. Our one and only hope is to return to the Father. We need to catch a fresh sight of the father and his response to the elder brother. The same Father of grace.

Have you noticed in Jesus' parable how the father didn't just welcome home the wayward son, but also sought to invite the elder brother in? Isn't that a most powerful picture? Jesus was not speaking to the Pharisees and saying: "I reject you because you reject Me. The way is open for you also to come to the Father."

Though the elder brother did not speak respectfully or kindly to his father when he came in from his work, nevertheless not one harsh word was spoken by the father to this good-living elder brother. He was the same in spirit to the elder brother as he had been to the younger brother.

What a powerful message this is to people like myself who have been "good sons of the Father" since they were young, who have never really left the Father's house and gone off to live in a far country, who have never rebelled, and yet whose hearts are cold, loveless, without the Father's deep compassion for the sinner.

To us the Father comes with His invitation of love -- "Come, enter into My house. Leave behind those little, hidden sins that you hold on to in your hearts. Come, receive my grace and forgiveness for all your sins. Come, come and let us feast together."

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