

The Prodigal God - A Tale of Two Sons

Last weekend we began a journey into Jesus' most famous story, commonly known as the prodigal Son. It's a story of two sons and a Father who loved them both.

We began by looking at the context that Jesus told the story in – discovering that Jesus was directly responding to the accusation by religious people, the Pharisees, that he was hanging out with the wrong people – people known as sinners – the rule-breakers.

Jesus does not defend himself against the accusation – in fact he agrees with it! Not only is Jesus a friend of sinners – the people supposedly lost to God are exactly the ones that are the focus of his life.

Last week I mentioned that if the message of Jesus Christ is like a lake, the story of the Prodigal Son is where we can see all the way to the bottom. Today we are going to jump into the deep end as we focus on the two sons.

First, let's hear the first part of the story as Jesus told it 2000 years ago:

Luke 15:11-24

¹¹"A man had two sons. ¹²The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"

²⁰"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

²²"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

The story begins with the younger of two sons coming to his Father and asking for his share of the family estate. Some cultural background at this point is really important. In Ancient Middle-Eastern culture it was customary for a patriarch's estate to be divided on his death between his surviving sons. The oldest son was entitled to a double portion of what the other son's received. So in a family of two sons the older brother would receive 2/3 of the estate and the younger brother 1/3. The other rule – set in stone – is that the estate would only ever be divided when the Father died, and not before.

The opening shock of this story for Jesus' audience was the shame-filled slap in the face the young son gave his Father. By his actions, the younger son was ripping his family apart – he was treating his Father as if he was dead. It was unheard of, an incredible act of selfishness.

Today we would probably argue - all he wanted to do was to get his share of the 'stuff' and see the world. He was just trying to discover himself, work out who he was, rather than just fit into the mould and expectations of a very restrictive society. The world would be a better place if tradition, prejudice, hierarchical authority and other barriers to personal freedom were weakened or removed – wouldn't they. Certainly that is a very common view today isn't it.

Let's pick up Jesus' story again. So the younger son wanted to see and experience the world but he did it at the expense of his family and especially his father. By his actions he communicated that he loved his father's material wealth and the pleasure it could buy, more than his father. And so he could not

– would not – wait until his dad died to get his hands of the cash and so he demands it NOW!

You may remember me saying Tim Keller calls this parable the Prodigal God, the reckless, extravagant God and this is where we first see the reckless love of the father. You see the Father would have been well within his rights, in fact expected to reject out of hand the young son's outrageous request. He should have sent his son away with a slap across the face and shame in his heart. The Father bears the social cost of shame and ridicule, not to mention the economic cost, in order that the son might exercise his will in leaving the family for dead. The Father bears the agony and cost of his younger son's rejection.

A key Christian doctrine is that of free will. It says that as human beings, created in the image of God, we have the God given capacity to make out own moral choices.

To love God and others, or not. To worship God, or not.

Repentance begins with coming to our senses

Eventually Jesus' story tells us that the younger son finds himself as far from his family as possible. In a foreign country, living among strangers, broke and destitute – the younger son suddenly sees through the fog of his own rebellion. He realizes what he has squandered; he recognizes that his only hope for survival is to throw himself at the feet of his Father, begging for mercy. And so he begins the long journey home, all the way rehearsing his speech.

As we know the Father runs out to meet him and the party begins.

But I want to leave the younger son for now. Jesus' story was of a Father and two sons. The 'bad son' – the younger son – who we have just been talking about – and an older son - all the while staying at home, faithfully sticking by dad and working hard. He is the good son. But after his younger brother returns, and after his Father welcomes him back with open arms into the family – the cracks start to appear. Let's hear what happens:

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷"Your brother is back," he was told, "and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return."

²⁸"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'

³¹"His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³²We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

Back a number of years ago a Boeing 737 took off from Hawaii. The plane was carrying 90 passengers and 5 crew and quickly climbed to an altitude of 24,000 feet. 23 minutes after take-off there was an explosive noise in the roof of the fuselage which led to a catastrophic explosion and decompression of the cabin that ripped away much of the roof in the front section of the plane. Miraculously and with great skill the pilots were able to land the plane back in Hawaii. Only one flight attendant lost her life.

The cause of the catastrophic explosion was traced to metal fatigue caused by corrosion. There was a failure of the adhesive used to seal joins in the aluminium sheets of the fuselage that allowed water to seep in. One small crack. One small crack in a plane that no one could see led to a catastrophic failure. Everything looked good on the outside. There was no reason to doubt the plane's air worthiness; it all looked good. (Anyone flying in the next few weeks?) Just keep that image in your mind.

So the Father has welcomed home the younger son with a feast and party the whole village was invited to. The party would be a messy, raucous, joy-filled affair to which even gate-crashers were welcome. Guests would come and go. The fatted calf was on the spit and food would be plentiful and the wine even more so. All of this would be accompanied by music that set the tone of the celebration.

It was the music the older brother heard as he came after a long day overseeing work in his Father's fields. Six days a week – stopping only for the Sabbath – the older brother would work in and around the family farm –

ploughing, planting, tending, weeding and reaping. It was day-in, day-out work - work that a good and dutiful son would do.

Tired and hungry he could hear the music coming from the family compound. Straight away he is suspicious. Rather than going in to find out himself – the older brother calls one of the young servants over to ask what is going on. The boy confirms his worst fears – his younger brother has returned and the party is in his honour.

There are a number of rude words I could use to describe the older brother's emotions. Suffice to say, he was consumed with anger and rage. Up to this point the older brother had lived a life-time conforming to family and cultural expectations. He had done everything expected of a dutiful son. But now his well-constructed life begins to unravel – the crack in the fuselage begin to appear and leads to devastating explosion. Consumed with anger and jealousy, he refuses to go in to the party – staying instead outside with the servants and children pacing up and down along the dusty street.

This is an outrageous act of disrespect towards his Father. In fact he ended up in exactly the same place as his younger brother, selfish and wanting his father's stuff. His absence would be noticed – everyone else was there. Eventually word reaches the Father that his oldest son is outside, refusing to come in.

The Father then again does the completely unexpected. Rather than remaining inside pointedly ignoring his son's offensive act, he gets up and comes outside to plead with him to come in. Just as he broke conventions in running to welcome his younger son home while he was still a long way-off, coming outside to plead with his son was an act of humility.

The younger son demonstrated his rebellion against his Father by demanding his inheritance and leaving the Father's house to 'find himself' or whatever. The older son demonstrates his rebellion by refusing to come into his Father's house. And in refusing to come in the older brother exposes the true nature of his heart. Yes he has stayed home, yes he has slaved in the fields, yes he has waited patiently for his inheritance, but not because he loves the Father, but because he loves the Father's things.

In throwing an expensive party the Father was wasting his inheritance. It was his money that was being spent – or so he thought.

While the younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, the older brother got control by staying home and being good. In the end, both sons loved the father's things more than the father. They are equally lost in their refusal to live in the Father's love – of loving the Father's things more than the Father.

Two groups, two sons

Remember the two groups that were listening to Jesus' story that we looked at last week. The Pharisees who were the rule keepers and the sinners and tax collectors who were the rule breakers. In the story the older brother was a rule-keeper. The younger brother was a rule-breaker. The message of Jesus' story would have been very clear to those who first heard it. The younger son represented sinners and tax collectors – the rule-breakers – the older brother represented the Pharisees – the rule-keepers. Shockingly Jesus is saying that both sons and therefore both groups – the rule-keepers and rule-breakers are just as lost as each other.

Jesus is saying to religious people who pride themselves of keeping the rules, on living an upright life that they are as equally lost as the most shameful sinner. Younger brothers are easy to identify. They make bad choices – their mistakes are easy to see. They drink too much, have questionable sexual practices and do dumb things. Older brothers are harder to spot because they live behind a veneer of respectability, of niceness. They go to church, they pray, they read their Bible – but all out of an expectation that God owes them.

Those of you who were here when we listened to Tim Keller the first week, nearly everyone I have spoken to were challenged by the teaching on the older brother the most. Churches are full of elder brothers and sisters – or at least those who are elder-brother-ish. I have to question some of my attitudes. It is a frightening prospect.

How do we know if we are like the elder brother in Jesus' story, at least in part? To check, we only need to look at what the elder brother says to his Father to uncover the true state of his heart: Elder brothers are often consumed by **Surprising Anger**.

In Jesus' story we read that the older brother became angry when he discovered his Father was throwing a party for his wayward younger brother. It wasn't fair!

His Father owed him for his dutiful obedience. In the back of our minds we can feel the same way towards God. "I have done the right thing - God should do the right thing by me." "I attend church regularly, I pray daily, I give my tithe, I'm kind to people, I avoid doing the wrong thing, or being with the wrong people – God you owe me" and when life doesn't turn out like we would like it, we get angry and we blame God.

No-one would have known the older brother was angry with his Father until it all erupted outside their home. It was an angry outburst that not only surprised the father but probably the older son himself. It was anger that came from someplace deep.

Often we are not even aware that we are angry with God – we bury it deep until one day it erupts in a messy, uncontrolled spectacle.

Elder brothers live lives of **Joyless Conformity**. The older brother says to his Father 'all these years I have been slaving for you.' He has lived in his Father's house with the attitude of a slave not a son. He has done what is required in order to get what he wants. He has lived for the Father's things not for the Father's love.

Over the years I have been struck that so many people who profess Christian faith live seemingly joy-less lives. (Not here at OBC of course.) You have to do this and not that, and serve here, and not there, and feel guilty about this and challenged about that and you're not allowed to like that even though it's fun, and I'm thinking 'Where is your joy?' 'What has happened to your joy?' Joy comes from being secure in the love of God and experiencing freedom in the grace of God.

Elder brothers have **Compassion Deficiency**. When the older brother continues his angry tirade against his Father he tellingly refers to 'this son of yours'. There is no compassion for his lost brother.

This lack of compassion shows up in churches when we resist God's command to share the gospel with others – the lost. We make church about us, our needs, our comfort, our preferences, our songs, our traditions – rather than the church being a community of transforming power in the world.

Elder brothers demonstrate **Judgmental Attitudes**. The older brother can't believe his dad seems to be rewarding his rebellious brother with a party. He is devastated that his Father is so freely forgiving his brother. The spirit of the

older brother lives in us as we hold on to grudges, we refuse to forgive, as we judge people by the way they look, the way they speak, the colour of their skin, their sexuality, their religion....

Surprising Anger, Joyless Conformity, Compassion Deficiency, Judgmental Attitude.

These are all symptoms of Elder Brotherness. The fact is that religious people, good church going people like you and me, make great older brothers. This was the unmistakable point Jesus was making to the religious people of his day – the Pharisees. While the sinners and tax collectors were seen to clothe themselves in self-indulgence, in rebellious acts like the younger brother, the Pharisees clothed themselves in self-righteousness that sought to manipulate God for their own purposes – just like the older brother.

Both the younger and older brothers are alienated from God.

But...the younger brother knew he was alienated from God. The older brother was blind to the fact.

The clear message of Jesus story is that the older brother's lostness is the more dangerous of the two spiritual conditions because it is so deceptive and deadly.

The younger brother knows that he needs the Father's love and so readily accepts it when it is offered. The older brother is blind to his need.

The story finishes with the younger brother inside his Father's house feasting and his older brother outside fuming. We do not know whether he comes in – whether he welcomes his Father's invitation.

Some of us have spent a lifetime in the church, serving faithfully, doing the right thing. We have lived in the neighbourhood of God's grace, but have never really experienced its liberating freedom and overflowing joy. God is still a mystery and faith is just plain hard work - a habit we can't break. We are strangers to grace. Like the older brother consumed by his anger and confusion outside his Father's house we see everyone else having a great time and we just don't get it.

The Father treated both of his sons the same way. He left his home to offer an invitation to both his sons to come to the table and feast with him. The young brother accepts this gift of grace. The question for us older brothers and sisters is this: Will we accept God's invitation? Grace is always knocking at our door.

We don't come to grace – grace comes to us and invites us into the presence of our Father. Will we accept the invitation?