

Two Sons

Luke 15:11-32 | March 29, 2020 | Bryce Beale

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. To the humble, in fact, God gives salvation. The humble will live forever; they will never die, not ultimately. They are promised happiness age upon age unending.

These promises are not for any other category of person. The rich are not guaranteed entry into paradise, nor the intelligent, the upper or the lower class, the white, black, Hispanic, or any nation or ethnicity under the sun. Only one group of people will see the inside of heaven's gates: the humble.

Those who labor daily to live an upright life will not, for that reason alone, see the kingdom. Heaven does not belong to the good. It belongs to those who know they are not good, and who therefore seek God's grace. And God, says Scripture, gives grace to the humble—every time.

We may wonder why *this* should be heaven's one requirement, and not some other item. Why should humility, which despairs of saving itself by its own goodness and looks to God for salvation instead, always receive that salvation, no matter what else it brings with it? Why has God not yet turned away even one humble, repentant sinner who has knocked on his door? Kings and emperors, presidents and prime ministers have all come knocking and been turned away, but not one repentant lowlife has ever been left outside. Why?

Because humility alone gives God his due glory.

For you to ask God to accept you because you have been pretty good is a smack in the face of God's honor. First, because what you consider "pretty good" is almost unfiltered evil compared to the absolute goodness and purity of God. You cannot think yourself pretty good and God holy at the same time; if you are content with your own uprightness, you show that you think little of God's.

But secondly, to base salvation on your goodness makes little of God's glorious work in saving you. This would be like being the object of a special operations rescue in the middle east. A team of soldiers battles through a line of enemies to rescue you, and

several of them lose their lives. Yet when they finally reach you, you say, “You really didn’t need to go through all that trouble, I can take care of myself.”

Christ died upon Calvary in an excruciating manner to rescue lost sinners from the clutches of sin. He does not need you to add to his work, as if it were incomplete. Salvation is of the Lord. All that is required of you is the humble faith that, aware of its own need, receives that grace.

We come today in our study of Luke to perhaps the best-known and most-loved parable of all that Christ ever told. We saw last week two similar parables—one of a lost sheep, another of a lost coin. Today, Jesus tells us about the lost, or the prodigal, son.

And in so doing, he teaches us to love humility, to love repentance, and to despise our own pride. He teaches us to be like children, needy and dependent, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

LUKE 15:11-32

Although we call this the parable of the prodigal son, it is really a parable about two sons, not one. There is the younger, prodigal boy, and then his older, respectable brother.

Perhaps you recall that this is the third of the three parables in this chapter, and all deal with a similar theme: a lost sinner being found. All three as well were provoked by the same event, found in verses 1 and 2: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”¹ The parable of the two sons, then, is yet another answer to Jesus’ enemies, the Pharisees, who faulted him for spending his time with the baser members of society. He was eating with sinners.

And so, he tells of the two sons. Since the parable is about both of these brothers, we will divide today’s message into two. First we will see what Jesus wishes us to learn from the younger of them, the prodigal; and then we will see the lesson that comes from the older. The goal of all the parables, and of our time in God’s word

¹ ESV.

today, is to produce in us the humility that God produced in the prodigal, and which was lacking in his brother.

The younger son

We begin then with the younger son. We call him the “prodigal,” an older term that refers to someone who lives recklessly and wastefully. You can see why this term has been chosen, if you review again his behavior in verses 11-13:

There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

Now, in the rest of this parable, it is clear that the father still owns property. So when the son comes and asks him to give him his inheritance early, it seems most likely that this occurred: the father hands over one-third of his property to this son, with the older son getting two-thirds, by way of a share. The young son then takes that share and sells it at a lower price to someone willing to wait for the father to pass away before assuming that third share.

The son after all cannot take his property with him to the far country that he travels to in the text, so he must have liquidated it somehow.

Just like that then, this reckless young son has liquidated one-third of his family’s wealth. Maybe it required generations to build up that wealth—now, the work of generations is shattered.

But the young son does not mind. It is clear that he has only one person’s interests in his head: himself. To ask his father to give him his inheritance early may have been like wishing his father were dead, an immense dishonor in that society.

But why would this son dare cast his family and his genealogy behind him? Verse 13 explains the whole motive: he “took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.” In verse 30, his brother will say that he devoured the property “with prostitutes,” which most likely was the case.

This son is a partier. The whole force of his life is cast in the direction of pleasure. Today he would be found in a big city, in the nicest clubs, with the nicest clothes, always with a smell of alcohol and weed about him, always accompanied by a less-than-principled young woman. He is not working, since he has a stockpile of his father's wealth. All day, every day, he chases pleasure with reckless abandon. He does not dwell on the far future, when his money will run out; he is in this way not unlike an animal, which seeks immediate gratification and hasn't a mind strong enough to plan ahead.

As we will very soon see, his wise father is the best at describing the sort of lifestyle his youngest son has chosen. Look at verse 24: "For this my son was dead," and afterward, "he was lost." He'll repeat this description in verse 32.

This son is dead, even while he lives. He is dead in his trespasses and sins, dead to all his healthy relationships, dead to God. He may think he has found the good life, but in fact he is lost to all that matters. He would, unchecked, burn out his little life in a few years, along with all his cash, and then slip unnoticed into an eternity of punishment for his lawless lifestyle.

But, he does not go unchecked. God intervenes with a great kindness: a famine. For those things in life which seem most painful and unpleasant, when used by God to stop us from our mad dash toward hell, are kindnesses, as many of you know well. And this son receives a double kindness, in that his money runs out just in time for the famine to appear.

Verses 14 on read as follows:

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.²

The pigs probably were eating carob pods, which are not naturally digestible by humans. Yet this son, now nearly a slave of some foreigner in a foreign land, is so hungry that he would be happy to give these a try. Pigs were an unclean animal for the Jews, so by

² Vv. 14-16.

offering this picture, Jesus gives us a glimpse of the lowest low possible for this boy. He is castaway, neglected, hungry. And the saddest conclusion to his sorry state is given right at the end of verse 16: “and no one gave him anything.”

His father had given him everything—up to a third of his kingdom! But he had thrown that all away for a few fleeting pleasures which were now dried up.

You may be in the pigsty with this prodigal right now. Almost certainly some of you are. Scripture says, “There is a way that seems right to a man.”³ And maybe that is the way you have been living your life, quite recklessly, without thought of what comes after death, perhaps even without thought of what comes in ten years. Pleasure and personal satisfaction have been your only aims, and maybe you found what you were looking for.

But only for a time. “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” If God is kind to you, he will bring the famine right when your funds run out, and you will find yourself salivating over carob pods with the swine. You will be at the lowest point, where hope seems lost. You may be there right now. Heaven seems forever closed to you, because heaven is a nice, clean place that belongs to nice, clean people, right? What hope do you have, here in the sty, covered to your waist in the mud of your own sin?

I will tell you what hope you have, if this is you. Better yet, I will let Jesus tell you what hope you have, for that is just what he does next in the parable. And if you will do this one thing, which the prodigal does next—if you will humble yourself like him and repent—then your end will not be death, but will be that of the prodigal when he returns home.

Return to the story then in verse 17:

But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your

³ Prov. 14:12; 16:25.

son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” And he arose and came to his father.⁴

This is the doorway to eternal life. No one can enter the Master’s house or come before the Almighty unless he goes through this door—it is the door of humility. You may call it faith, for it is also that. But here it is pictured as that side of faith that we call humility, or repentance.

Notice what you do not find in the younger son’s reasonings. There is not one excuse for his behavior. There is not one dampening of the harshness of his own sin and wrong. He does not try to vindicate himself; he does not try to push the blame onto anyone else. He is not lashing out at his father’s restrictions, or his older brother’s unkindness, or anything else. He does not blame his sin on his parents, or on his parents’ parents. He does not blame his error on an imbalance in the brain or in hormones or anywhere else.

When he speaks of his lifestyle, he speaks with words plain and clear: “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” He acknowledges his offense against God, and he recognizes the hurt he has done to others. And so he says, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

This is true humility, true repentance, true turning from sin. Any person can sign a paper or say a prayer without any of this attitude, and so miss salvation quite wide of the mark. Yet here this young boy in the pigsty, without an altar call and without an evangelist’s hand on his shoulder, comes to himself. God imparts to him a realization about himself and his circumstance. And, broken down by the kind trials God has given him, he does not resist. He stops kicking at the goads behind him, and submits. “I will arise,” he says, “and go to my father.”

See what happens when he does, which is the next and the most precious part of this whole parable. Verse 20 continues:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants,

⁴ Vv. 17-20a.

“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate.⁵

The reason that humility gets God’s grace, when nothing else can, is that humility makes God’s righteous wrath no longer necessary. So long as the stubborn sinner resists, God’s wrath must bear down against him, even while his love reaches out toward him with longing. The sinner is like a wooden board under a heavy load, which is bowing in the middle. So long as that board stands straight in its rebellion, it will bend further and further until it snaps. But as soon as it lays itself down, it is no longer in danger of the weight.

God would rather receive the sinner with all the joy of the father in this parable. God is the one represented by the father here—this is a description of his heart toward us. As soon as he sees us on the road, coming back with true humility, his wrath dissipates. The last ounce of it is spent on the cross, and none remains for us. Instead we, though expecting as much as this unworthy son to be only a slave at best, are embraced by our Creator.

He brings out a ring with his royal signet to signify that we are reinstated in the family; he puts the best robe upon us, to cover our dirty garments; he gives us sandals since we penniless paupers lack them. And now we need not yearn after carob pods—he kills the fattened calf, and we celebrate. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. All of this, because the sinner humbled himself. He was dead, but now he lives; lost, but now he is found.

Precisely the same may be said of you this moment if you will humble yourself. It does not matter if you have soiled your garments in the pigsty of the worst sins. There is a robe of righteousness which the Father is eager to throw around your shoulders. It does not matter if all your former companions have forsaken you, and no one gives you anything. The Father will throw his arms around you and take you in.

If your bare feet shame you, come to the Father and he will cover them. Or if your emptiness makes you draw back, come forward

⁵ Vv. 20b-24.

and you will have the fattened calf at the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Give glory to God. Acknowledge that you have ruined yourself and cannot repair the breach, and in that moment God will do all. Already Christ has done all, has suffered in the place of sinners to make them whole. The only thing required of you is one humble hand extended to receive God's grace, with no excuses, no blame shifting. Accept your error and cast yourself before the Father, and he will receive you.

The older son

Now, so far we have been concerned with the younger brother, and rightly so. But here Jesus introduces another person in his parable: the older brother. The Savior is, after all, answering his critics, the Pharisees, and so he portrays their attitude in the figure of this older brother.

Here is this parable's last desperate attack on our pride, which would keep us from God's embrace. If you find in yourself the self-righteous attitude of this older brother, then Jesus sets him in front of your face to challenge you, if perhaps you too might be saved from your more respectable sins.

The older brother appears beginning in verse 25:

Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"⁶

We can see from the start that this older brother, who has received two-thirds share of the inheritance, is dutiful in every respect. He enters the scene coming from "the field," where he

⁶ Vv. 25-30.

no doubt has been working diligently for his father. He says as much in verse 29: “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.” When it comes to the letter of his father’s law, he has kept that letter. He’s not the one who went running away to prostitutes, shaming his father and family and casting his inheritance to the wind. He has been all these years working in the fields, and doing whatever his father asked him to do.

You may wonder why the older son should be faulted in this parable—he’s a good man, isn’t he? He keeps the rules. Yet notice that one quality which this older son lacks: humility. He is proud. How do we know? It seeps through all his actions and words. Yes, he may be working as his father commands—after all, since he is to inherit the field he’s working in, it is in his best interest to be doing it. But notice what is wrong with his heart. When he hears that the party at his house is for his brother, returned from his wanderings, he does not respond with the kind and generous heart of his father. Instead, he is angry and refuses to enter.

The father was glad to have his son back, because the father loved that son. But this older son shows that in the end he is not much different than his younger brother. He ultimately loves himself. He is displeased that the fattened calf should be killed for his brother’s return, because not even a small goat was ever killed for him and his friends. This older brother is missing the whole point, because his sight is set so narrowly upon himself. He is proud and self-centered.

You see it again in his sense of deserving. He suggests that he deserves grace, whereas his brother does not. But that goes against the very nature of grace. If God should give a special celebration for a sinner’s return, we cannot complain that our own celebration may have seemed less. Neither we nor they ever deserved any celebration at all! That is the way humility thinks. But this older brother, this Pharisee, does not think that way.

So we come finally to the end of the parable, and to its primary point, found in the closing remarks of the most remarkable person in the whole story: the father. He ends with these kind words:

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.⁷

We might wonder how this relates to the Pharisees who, unless they too repent, will not receive any of the inheritance. But the bigger point of the parable is not found in that question, but in this statement: "it was fitting to celebrate."

Brothers and sisters, I beg God that he would spare us the heart of the Pharisees, which always tries to intrude itself into our attitudes toward the lost. May we not despise one sinner, since we ourselves are only sinners found by grace. What do we have that we have not received? If we get a goat or a fattened calf, we already have infinitely more than we deserve.

May that loving embrace of the Father on the road melt our hearts, so that we long for all our friends, all our neighbors, all our family, all the world to know that same feeling we have felt, when after all our prodigaling we found ourselves safe in the warm and comforting embrace of God.

And may we spend ourselves and be spent, not moping about outside the house with our selfish feelings hurt, but out on the road seeking our brother who is lost, appealing to him to come to himself, to humble himself, and to return to his father's house, where he will be welcomed.

⁷ Vv. 31-32.