

Luke 15:11-32 The Two Lost Sons

A writer tells the story of how he and a friend took his little daughter, Ellen, to the cinema for her birthday. After the film, as her father was wrapping her up against the cold winter wind, his friend asked the little girl how old she was. “I can’t tell you,” Ellen replied, “I have my mittens on.”

You see, the little girl couldn’t count because her fingers were obscured by the mittens, she was unable to see them and so she was unable to work out the solution. Well, as we began to see last week, Jesus isn’t so much taking the gloves off in his dealings with the religious leaders as taking the mittens off and revealing the truth to them.

And as we come to the longest of the three elements of the parable, the truth really starts to come alive, so today let’s look at Luke 15 – Jesus’ story about a family; a father, an older son and a younger son.

In fact, if you want a title – Jesus’ title for this story, a better title than “the Parable of the Prodigal son”, then it’s right there in verse 11 and it is this; “The Parable of ‘a man who had two sons.’”

And today we are going to begin looking at those two sons and how the father deals with them. But let’s take them one at time and this morning focus in on the younger son, or the younger brother – I will refer to him as both.

Now, because the story begins with a request, we are going to look at three areas relating to it; The meaning of the request, the response to the request and lastly the difference it makes to us.

So, first of all let’s take a look at **the meaning of the request.**

The younger son goes to his father and says, “Give me my share of the estate.” It sounds a little up front to us but I want you to understand how outrageous this request actually is and to do that we need to understand a little of Middle Eastern culture in Jesus’ day.

In some senses there is not a lot of difference for us; I once met someone who told me that they were off on a skiing holiday using the money from the SKIN fund. “The SKIN fund?” I asked, “Yes,” they replied, “the Spend the Kid’s Inheritance Now fund!”

In other words, these people were living for the moment, spending every last penny they had and when they died, well, there wouldn’t be much for their kids to inherit – but that’s the point, isn’t it? You only inherit from your parents when they are dead.

So when the younger son goes to his father and says, “Father, give me my share of the estate”, what the younger son is in effect saying is – and what he would certainly be understood in Middle Eastern culture to be saying – was, “Father, I wish you were dead.”

Now, in that culture the request of the younger son would have shown an extraordinary disrespect for his father. To utter it would have been a disgrace to the family name and there was only one, one possible way in which the father should and could have responded; to drive the younger son from the family home with nothing except verbal and physical blows.

Why? Because quite clearly the younger son is saying to the Father; “I want your things, but I don’t want you.” Now what would make someone do that?

Well Augustine, one of the great Church Fathers from the fourth century wrote in his famous book called “Confessions” about a theory for our sins, the attitude which makes us behave like the younger son.

Listen to what he says, “A man has murdered another man— what was his motive? Either he desired his wife or his property or else he would steal to support himself; or else he was afraid of losing something to him; or else, having been injured, he was burning to be revenged.”

And Augustine’s theory is that therefore even a murderer murders because he loves something. He loves romance or wealth or his reputation or something else too much, far too much, more than he ever should and certainly much more than he loves God, and that is why he murders.

Augustine says that our problem, our sin, is rooted not in black and white evil, but our hearts which are distorted by “disorderly loves”. In the movie “The usual suspects” Kevin Spacy’s character makes the brilliant observation that “The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.”

And here’s how he does it, we argue that love can’t be sinful, but of course, as we have just seen with Augustine’s example it can be if our love is a disorderly love which sets something or someone in the wrong place.

So, can you see how the younger son has a disorderly love? He may have lived with his father and for years obeyed his father, but he didn’t love his father. The thing he loved more than anything else was not the father, but the father’s things.

Do you remember the song I played earlier?

The other morning I woke up and heard it on the radio and I thought, “What a brilliant example of the two sons, the two brothers in Jesus’ parable.” Quite clearly the singer is a younger brother type of person and his parents are older brother type people.

The father is a doctor and the mother a charity worker; they keep all the rules, they pay for their son to go to summer camp, they plan for his college education, they even send him money all the while planning his future as a lawyer or a doctor or a civil engineer.

But what does the son do? He heads instead to California, sun, sand and amazing sex and when he gets the inkling that his girlfriend might be yearning for marriage, suburbia and a little plot of land he ditches her and opts for music and the free electric band instead.

He’s clearly a younger son type and like the younger son in Jesus’ story his father is just a means to an end. But now in Jesus’ story the younger son’s patience has run out, he’s not prepared to wait any longer – he would have known that his request would have brought shame and disgrace upon his family, torn it apart and pierced his father’s heart, but he clearly didn’t care.

So, that was the meaning of the request, but what was the **response** to it?

Well, now that you know that the only response to the disgraceful, shocking and disrespectful request of the younger son was that the father would drive him out of the house with physical blows and insults, you know exactly what Jesus hearers were expecting him to say, so now, don’t you get a sense of the shock that they must have felt when Jesus actually continued; “So [the father] divided his property between them”?

If the younger son's request shocked Jesus' listeners, the father's response would have left them absolutely stunned. You see, in their culture the elder son would expect to receive two thirds of the father's property on his death whilst the younger son would get one third – again, on the father's death.

But if the younger son asked for his share whilst the father was still alive and the father agreed to that request it's not as though the father could just pop down to the bank and withdraw money or write the younger son a cheque.

No, in order to fulfil this outrageously disrespectful request the father and the rest of the family would have to actually sell one third of all their property and land – so there would be serious financial repercussions for them.

In fact the Greek of verse 12 is literally “and he divided to them the living” and the word here translated “living” is “bios” from which we get our words like “biology” – it's a word which means life.

Think about it, in our day our house, or car, or possessions might be precious to us, but in Jesus' day your land was literally your life – rather than the land belonging to you, you belonged to the land, because it gave you life, so the father literally divided his “life” between them.

Here in this story Jesus has deliberately chosen a word which drives home the point that the father is being asked to tear apart his life – and the remarkable thing is that he does.

As people listened to this story they would probably have felt that the father was being foolish; that he was allowing the younger son to walk all over him and disgrace him and humiliate him.

Certainly that's how they would have expected the older brother to feel. But we have the benefit of hindsight, don't we?

Imagine what would have happened if the father had driven the younger son from the house, if he had insulted him and hit him across the face – would there ever have been a way back for him? Would the younger son have ever entertained the thought of going home? Of course not. Even in his darkest moments or deepest need the younger son would have known that the door to his father's house was forever closed to him.

But by bearing the distress and pain – the disgrace and humiliation of the son's sin himself, by not taking revenge, by not inflicting pain on the son who had caused him such injury and agony the father kept the door to their relationship open meaning that one day reconciliation was possible.

Well, what difference does this realisation make for us?

Now, this week, we have focused in on the younger brother, but next week we are going to take a closer look at the elder brother and without spoiling it for you, I want to flag up that Augustine's theory transfers to him too. The reality we are going to see is that whether we are free living, irreligious younger brother types, or moral religious, buttoned down elder brother types we all have disordered loves, or what Tim Keller calls; Idols of the heart.

And he gives a really good example of what that is like in our relationship with God;

"Imagine," says Keller, "a wife who has a husband who spends hours with another woman talking about all his and her problems, and he goes travelling with this other woman, and talks and thinks about her incessantly. So the wife confronts her husband and he says,

“What’s the problem? I married you, didn’t I? I pay the mortgage, don’t I? I do all my duties, don’t I? If someone asks, I say you are my wife. Why are you so upset?”

To which the wife will say (rightly) that someone else has captured his heart and imagination.” And the point is that’s what it is like to love the father’s things more than the father, that’s how wrong and insulting and unhealthy to our relationship with God it is.

You know, it is very easy to point the finger at the younger brother, to see how he loves the father’s things more than he loves the father, to see how something has taken God’s rightful place in his life.

And you may not be living a dissolute life, you may be living a good life, but in preparation for next week I want us all to consider whether or not we have any disordered loves, whether or not you ever put something in the number one position in your life, the place where God should be.

And why should we put God there? Well, let me give you one example from the younger brother. You see God has done for us what the father has done for the younger brother in the story. How do a lot of people view God?

To them God is an angry God, a vengeful God, a God who likes nothing more than a bit of smiting. If we are all sinners then surely if God is like that then we should expect him to come into the world in wrath and anger, driving us out with condemnation, abuse and blows.

But that’s not how God came is it? Jesus came not to give violent blows, but to receive them, he came not with hands that held weapons to punish, but hands which received nails.

In John 12 Jesus says, “I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.” – yes there will be a day of God’s judgement, but Jesus came 2000 years ago not to bring that judgement, but to bear our judgement and on the cross his life was literally torn apart. And Jesus did all that so that if we repent then, like the younger son, reconciliation is possible for us.

Now, don’t you see the beauty of what Jesus has done for us? Jesus was perfectly happy, perfectly at peace – he was with the Father in heaven, he had no need to come to earth – God would have been quite within his rights to come against sinful humanity with wrathful anger – but because he loves you - he didn’t.

Now, don’t you see the beauty of what Jesus has done for us? Just as the crowd would have gasped when they heard the father’s reaction in Jesus’ story, aren’t you filled with renewed wonder and love for Jesus? So the more you look at Jesus and see what he did for you, the more you will love him above anyone or anything else.

The more you see that God is recklessly extravagant and that he has spent everything on you, the greater the possibility that he will capture your eternal heart so that nothing matters more to you than he does and then your loves will be reordered as you are reconciled with the Father. Amen.