

The God Who Pursues Us – God Pursues the Rebel

6/3/18 – Pastor Randy

Luke 15:11-24 (ESV)

And he said, "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. 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.¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

"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 son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. 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, '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.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most well-known and cherished parables of Jesus. There has been a quite a bit of debate over the years regarding who the central character is in this story. The natural first response would be to suggest that the younger son is the main character. After all, doesn't the title, The Prodigal Son, prove that? Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and popular Christian author, wrote a book about this parable several years ago and titled it, "The Prodigal God". His book title suggests that the father who represents God in the story, is the main character. Others suggest that since the parable was primarily intended to address and correct the behavior of the Pharisees, and the elder brother in the story represents their behavior, he must be the main character

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of the parable. I think the attempts to identify the most important character are misguided. Jesus was teaching extremely important, vital truth about each of the characters and each one warrants close examination. Because Jesus was communicating critical truth through each character, I am going to spend three weeks on this parable, each week focusing on one of the three characters; the younger son and elder son, and on Father's Day, the father.

In order to clearly and correctly understand the meaning of Jesus parables it is important for us to pay attention to the situational context. The first question we must ask is, "To whom was Jesus addressing this parable?" At the beginning of chapter 15 of Luke's gospel we discover that "tax-collectors and sinners" were coming close to listen to Jesus. The phrase "tax collectors and sinners" was a colloquialism; an ordinary way of labeling people who were not faithfully keeping the Mosaic Law and were therefore considered unworthy of being included among God's people. But there were some other people gathered around Jesus; some Pharisees and Scribes. These religious leaders of Jesus day were generally opposed to Jesus and constantly seeking an opportunity to accuse him of some religious violation. In this instance they are complaining that Jesus is welcoming sinners and even eating with them. To share a table with someone was a cultural expression of acceptance. Our world is not much different. Picture the typical middle school or high school lunchroom where students are welcome or unwelcome at certain tables depending on their social status within the school.

It is in response to this situation that Jesus told three consecutive parables. In my third message on Father's Day I am going to show the connection between the first two short parables and the parable of the prodigal son, because the first two parables are more narrowly focused on the father's heart that motivates him to pursue his people.

Now that we know who Jesus' audience is and the situation that prompted the telling of this parable we are better prepared to understand who the characters in the story are intended to represent.

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1. The father in this story represents God the Father and Jesus as well who is one with the Father and has come to do the work of the Father fulfilling the mission of the Father.
2. The younger son represents the “tax collectors and sinners”.
3. The elder son and big brother represents the Pharisees and Scribes

Today God has some important truth to declare to us from Jesus’ description of the younger son. The younger son provides us with a good picture about the nature and gravity of our sin. Without a healthy, robust understanding of the nature of sin and the serious consequences that it brings, we will become deaf to the gospel of Jesus.

A. The Nature of Sin: Rebellion Against our Lord and Creator.

In the telling of the story of the prodigal son, Jesus depicted the sinners who had been gathering to listen to him as the younger son in the story. In doing so Jesus revealed the problem of this group of sinners for what it really was: They had rebelled against their creator and redeemer. Notice the Language of this son: *“give me the share of the property that is coming to me”*

The request of this Son was tantamount to telling his father that he wished he were dead. This request was worse than a slap in the face; worse than if he had spit in his father’s face. He doesn’t lash out in an angry tirade against his father. I think all of us can handle our children saying mean things to us when they are upset about our rules. This son’s words were more of a statement that he could care less about his father than that he was mad at his father. It was an extreme expression of ingratitude. He wanted his father’s stuff, but he didn’t want his father. He didn’t communicate hatred, he communicated indifference.

Sin, at its core, is rebellion against God as our authority; our Creator and Lord. It says, “I don’t need or want your rules. I want to be my own God.”

Not all rebels realize they are rebels because they assume they are entitled to live as they please. They don’t acknowledge and appreciate that their very life is from God and that they have a responsibility to Him. The prodigal treated his inheritance like an entitlement, not the gracious blessing from his father

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that it really was. He said “Give me the share of the property *that is coming to me.*” Other versions translate the phrase, “Give me my share of the property.” I like the ESV because it captures the attitude that his inheritance is what is “owed him”. Rebels feel entitled. They act as if God is obligated to them rather than viewing themselves as obligated to God. That he views his father’s property as if it was already his property reflects his attitude of ingratitude.

Not only that, but he doesn’t want his inheritance now so he can begin to take responsibility for the land to cultivate it and make it more productive. He wants to liquidate it, to take the proceeds and *leave his family*. His rebellion is evidenced not only by his demanding posture, but in his desire to sever ties to his whole family. He is in effect saying, I don’t want anything to do with you or your way of living. His actions were a wholesale rejection of his father and his father’s family!

We can see how the prodigal son depicts all of fallen humanity when we read Paul’s words in Romans 1:21-25,

“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

Paul’s description of man’s downward spiral into moral depravity begins with our failure to acknowledge and appreciate God as our creator and provider. This ingratitude is followed by outright rebellion against God as man begins to worship created things rather than God.

To often people read the story of the prodigal son and think about his sin in terms of his reckless, wild lifestyle. We too often think of sin in terms of specific actions such as lying, cheating, sexual immorality, and drunkenness. But those are the fruit that grow from rebellion; the root of sin.

B. The Seriousness of Sin

In my description of the younger son's sin as rebellion I have already identified the primary serious problem with sin. It is a grave offense against the God who created us to be his children so that he might love us and we might love Him in return. So first of all:

1. Sin is serious because it dishonors God.

The prodigal dishonored his father by choosing to turn his back on his father and separate from the family. He further dishonored his father by taking the wealth and resources his father had worked so hard to create so as to provide for the family, and squandering them.

In verse 13 we read that when he left he **"squandered his property in reckless living"**. Jesus gives us some more detail about the younger son's behavior when in verse 30 when he depicts the elder brother complaining to their father for celebrating his brother's return saying, "This son of yours has devoured your property with prostitutes". Squandering your own resources is irresponsible and immoral; squandering the resources of others is evil and disgraceful.

He took his father's hard earned money that was meant to be used for good and wasted it on drinking parties and prostitutes. It is not just that he engaged in immoral behavior; he did it on his father's dime. He didn't just waste his father's money, he spent it on the very things that his father would never, ever, in a million years contribute to!

Imagine if you invested money with a firm that told you they were committed to using it for righteous, just causes that fit your Christian values. Then let's say you found out someone embezzled the money and funneled it to human traffickers, drug smugglers and ISIS. It is bad enough your money wasn't protected but it is 100x worse to discover that your money was used to do fund activities you detest.

2. Sin is also serious because it dishonors others.

The prodigal son's rebellion separated him from not only his father, but from his father's family. He didn't only dishonor his father he dishonored his brother. Even though the property would have been divided between the sons, and the land would be used to support their own families when they

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married and had children, it was always expected that the extended family members would support and help one another. When the younger son left he went to a “far away land”. He removed not only himself but his resources from being available to assist the family of community. Not only did he hurt them and dishonor them by removing resources from the family, but as I said before, his leaving was tantamount to saying, “I don’t want to be a part of this family or this family’s way of life anymore. He didn’t just reject his father, he rejected his family and his community.

3. Finally, sin is serious because it dishonors the sinner

Rebellion against God separates us from God, removing us from God’s authority over our lives, but it simultaneously removes us from his protection, provision, and presence. Every teenager that has ever lived has thought if not said, “I can’t wait until I am old enough to move out on my home!” Mom and Dad’s house is cramping my style. I can’t do what I want to do. We confused freedom to do the right thing with freedom to do our thing.

We dishonor ourselves by pursuing the freedom from God’s presence and his moral prescriptions. The further I move from God’s presence the more I diminish myself as an image-bearer of the holy, just, righteous, good, merciful, and powerful, and loving God. That means my capacity to be a man of faithfulness, integrity, love, strength, justice and mercy becomes diminished.

And somewhere along the line, my dishonoring of myself as an image bearer will result in personal suffering. Sin will take you places you never wanted to go, keep you there longer than you ever wanted to stay, and make you pay more than you could ever afford to pay! That is exactly what happened to the prodigal son. He lost everything and experienced the humiliation of eating with the pigs. In a Jewish context where pigs were unclean, this picture is even more degrading! He bought the lie that Satan has been telling people since Adam and Eve. God said you will die? You won’t die! You will be set free to be like God! NOT! Sin will bring suffering, if not in this life, in hell in the next.

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We are in a day in which there might not be a truth that necessitates as much emphasis as the truth of the universal, depraved, rebellious nature of humankind towards his/her creator. If you were to push back against that assertion, suggesting that we need to prioritize the message of God's love and grace my response would be: "What meaning does the message of God's love really contain, what power does the message of God's grace possess, if not set against the background of our depraved sinful, rebellious condition?"

We suck the amazing right out of amazing grace when we lose our understanding of the nature and severity of sin. Why should I be moved by the bible's message of grace if I am a good person, or at least a better person than most others. Why should anyone be excited about the offer of having the penalty of their sin covered through the cross of Christ, if they believe their sins are so insignificant to warrant any punishment? Why be excited about the message that the power of sin has been broken through Jesus resurrection and can now be overcome in your life by the gift of his Spirit if you don't acknowledge that your sin even exists?

Sin is Great...BUT God's Grace is Greater

The Message to the rebels – Your sin, as serious as it is, does not leave you beneath the offer of God's grace or the reach of God's grace. You can come home. The turning point in the story is verse 17 where it reads, "**But when he came to himself**", which is another way of saying, "When he came to his senses." He realized that he had sinned against God and His father. He did not realize that he could go home. He could only imagine being received back into the house as a hired servant. He couldn't fathom his father taking him back as his son. But that is what makes this story about God's grace so wonderful. Despite what he had done, as bad as he had been, the father's door was wide open!!

"YOU CAN come home now". YOU, yes you, can come. But you don't know what I have done! The severity of your rebellion does not restrict your opportunity to come home. I would make the opposite case. Your awareness makes you ready to come!

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“You can COME home now.” Movement is required. It is not enough to think about coming home or to dream about coming home. You must come. You must respond to the drawing of the Spirit and express your repentance to God with your words and actions.

The rebellious younger son’s repentance is exemplified in his change of attitude reflected by his change of words. He went from an arrogant, demanding posture reflected by the words “Give me” to a humble, servant posture reflected by the words “make me”.

You can come HOME now. God isn’t interested in being your Dr. or your therapist. He doesn’t schedule you for an appointment. He wants to be your father. That means coming to God means coming into his house, under his authority, accompanied by his provision and protection, supported by his family.

You can come home NOW! How long did it take for this rebel son to be received back into His father’s house? While he was on the way, His father ran to him. Before he could finish his confession, the feast was being prepared!

When Jesus laid down his life, he created a bridge spanning the chasm that separated you and God caused by your rebellion. His death and resurrection has unlocked the door. Because of Jesus you.can.come.home.now!!

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