

The God Who Pursues Us – The Compliant Rebel

6/10/18 – Pastor Randy

Luke 15:25-32

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and 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, ²⁹ but 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. ³⁰ Yet 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. ³² We 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!'"

Last Sunday we looked at the first part of Jesus parable we call the Prodigal Son. Today God has some things to say to us from the second part of this story. The second part of the story focuses on the attitude and actions of the elder brother in the story.

The parable of the prodigal son is the third in a series of parables that Jesus shared in response to a particular situation. A parable is an extended metaphor and one of Jesus most common teaching tools that Jesus used. Some of these extended metaphors, like the prodigal son were so extended, they became stories. The power of these metaphor stories is in their ability to stimulate both the intellect and the emotion of the audience. Jesus used parables so His listeners would both think and feel the truth that he was communicating. It is a means of enabling the student to not only learn about truth but to experience the truth as they locate themselves within the story.

So let's review what we learned last week for those who were not with us. Luke depicts for us a scene where a crowd of tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus, drawing close to him to listen to His teaching. The Pharisees and Scribes (experts in the laws of Judaism) are also part of this scene, but they were present to scrutinize Jesus, not to learn from Him. Luke portrays these

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religious leaders as constantly looking for a reason to accuse Jesus of wrongdoing and undermine His credibility.

The Pharisees and Scribes began to complain that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, because in doing so he was showing acceptance to people who lived lives of blatant rebellion against the Law of God. These Pharisees believed that true followers of God would not associate with unfaithful Jews. The term Pharisee means “separate ones”. They thought covenant keepers should not associate with covenant breakers. Jesus responded to their complaints by telling three parables, three metaphor stories, to explain to his audience why he not only welcomed, but sought out the company of “sinners”.

The first parable was about a shepherd who lost one of his sheep and the second is about woman who lost a precious coin. I will come back to these and discuss them next week on Father’s Day, when we wrap up this series.

The third parable is the story of the prodigal son, but as I said last week, it is not a story about one person, but three. The story is about a father with two sons. Three characters; each representing those present for the telling of the story.

The father in the story represented Jesus and God the Father.

The younger son who blatantly rebelled against His father’s authority, shamelessly dishonoring his father, represented those in the group of tax collectors and sinners.

The elder brother, who spent his whole life committed to being an obedient son, represented the Pharisees and Scribes.

Last Sunday we read how the younger son demonstrated an attitude of ingratitude towards his father and a spirit of rebellion against his father when he demanded his inheritance while his father was still alive, liquidated his father’s property and fled far away, rejecting his family and their values, and squandered every last penny living a corrupt and immoral lifestyle.

But when he lost it all and ended up so far down he had to look up just to see bottom, he came to his senses. Left with nothing and no one, keeping company with literal pigs, he realized that he had messed up big time! His rebellion felt good for a while but it ruined him in the end. Sin will always take you places you never wanted to go, keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay and cost you more than you could ever afford to pay! He realized that he would be better off living as one of his dad’s hired servants so he returned home to plead for mercy, hoping that

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maybe, just maybe his dad would make him one of his servants. He couldn't imagine his dad ever welcoming him back as a son after the evil things he had done.

But his dad received him with more grace and love than he could ever imagine! His dad immediately received him with symbols of son-ship and held a feast to celebrate his return home. But he was not the only one that was shocked by his father's amazing grace. His older brother was also shocked.

The younger son's shock at his father's mercy and love resulted in joyful celebration. The older brother's shock at his father's mercy and love resulted in anger towards his father and an even deeper disdain for his brother.

What was Jesus communicating to the Pharisees and scribes when comparing them to the elder brother in the story? Jesus' description of the older brother's attitudes and actions served as a concise and colorful critique of the Pharisees attitudes and actions. The brother's response highlights three spiritual problems of the Pharisees.

1. They were Self-Righteous.

As soon as the older brother heard what his father was doing for his rebellious brother he was enraged. He said, "*All these years I've slaved for you and **never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.***"

Well, he couldn't say that anymore because "He refused to go in" and when his father came out to try and persuade him, he spoke to his father in a rude, dishonorable manner. He said, "Look here..."! He then accused his father of wrongdoing and places himself as the judge of his father's actions. His doesn't view his father's celebration for what it is – a celebration that his son is alive and back home! He treats it more as if his father is rewarding his younger brother. It was not a reward.

He immediately felt the need to contrast his obedience with his brother's rebellion. There are three symptoms of self-righteousness we need to watch out for:

A. They demonstrate a striking inability to recognize their own faults and sins.

B. They demonstrate a keen ability to identify and magnify the sins of others.

C. They pursue doing what is right, not out of love, but for a reward.

The Pharisees problem with self-righteousness was most clearly illuminated by Jesus in another parable recorded for us by Luke. In chapter 18, Luke tells that Jesus shared this story with "some who had great confidence in their own righteousness

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and scorned everyone else” Jesus said, “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

2. They were Self-Centered. This moment should have been about his brother, but he made it about him. When he saw all that his brother was getting, he immediately began to think about what he was not getting. He complained to his father, “How come he gets a party at Fogo De Chao and I’ve never even had a party at Outback! His father’s response was, “You have always been with me and have always enjoyed all that is mine”. The older son had lived everyday with the blessing of his father’s love and abundant provision. Hasn’t that been enough?!

He had been living everyday in his father’s house with his father’s blessings and had so much to be grateful for. And he probably perfectly content...until his brother got something he didn’t. He was just like little Bobby playing in the nursery, perfectly content with the toys in front of him...until little Johnny comes in and gets a toy out of the toy box. All of a sudden that toy which was of not interest to Bobby becomes a must have toy... and a toy he must have now!

When you can’t rejoice in other’s people’s victories, you have spiritual heart disease. If, when you hear good news about a blessing that has come to a friend, co-worker, or family member, and you can’t rejoice with them and for them because all you can think about is that it didn’t happen to you....get on your knees and ask the Holy Spirit to change your heart!

In chapter 11 Luke records a number of criticisms Jesus’ leveled against the Pharisees. One was that they loved “to sit in the seats of honor in the synagogues and receive respectful greetings as you walk in the marketplaces.” (Luke 11:43). In Jesus sermon on the mount he warned his disciples not to be like the Pharisees who did good works in order to be celebrated and honored by others. They were so self-centered that they even found a way to turn giving a means of getting for themselves.

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3. They Were Hard-Hearted.

When you are self-righteous and self-centered you become hard-hearted.

The older brother valued compliance without compassion. He obeyed the rules of the house, but he did not adopt for himself the values of the house.

The older brother's hard heart towards his brother is evident when, to his father, he referred to him as "*this son of yours*". By saying, "*this son of yours*" he was expressing his rejection of him as his brother. Although Jesus did not put the words in his mouth, there is little reason to expect that he experienced any heartache over his brother's absence and any joy over the fact that he had returned.

His heart was hard towards his father as well. He didn't care about his father's feelings or his father's honor. He revealed his true attitude towards the work he did in the family; he thought of himself as **working for his father** rather than **with his father**. In a moment of real transparency, he admits how he really felt about his family responsibilities: He felt like a slave. It was an obligation not a labor of love!

In chapter 3 of Mark's Gospel, we read about an occasion when Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and noticed a man with a deformed hand. Mark tells us that "Jesus' enemies watched him closely". If he healed the man's hand, they planned to accuse him of working on the Sabbath and violating the covenant.

Jesus called the man with the deformed hand to come to him and asked his critics the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" They were silent. Mark tells us that Jesus was angry and grieved "**by their hard hearts**". Then Jesus healed the man's hand right there in front of them. You know what happened next? Mark tells us that, "the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus."

Jesus gave them an opportunity to express desire to see this man healed, but they were so fixated on their petty rules and consumed by their animus towards Jesus that they couldn't bring themselves to support healing the man! They were so hard-hearted, so devoid of compassion for this disabled man, that they wouldn't even say anything when Jesus asked them, proving that they would rather let this man suffer than do anything that might reflect poorly on them.

Look at how Jesus compares the Pharisees to the older brother and contrasts them with He and the Father.

1. The older brother was enraged and embittered about a situation that brought overwhelming joy to the father.

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Jesus: “You are grumbling and complaining about the very thing all of heaven is celebrating and rejoicing.”

2. The older brother was staying away from his brother who came home, but the father ran to embrace him as he was coming home.

Jesus: “You, Pharisees, run away and stay away from the very people your father runs to. If you had your Father’s heart you would join me in my outreach to the tax collectors and sinners.”

3. The older brother had been in the father’s presence, a recipient of his blessings, his whole life, but he refuses the father’s presence and blessings in the end.

Jesus: “You Pharisees, have been blessed with the covenant promises but you are rejecting the Father’s presence in your life by rejecting me.”

CLOSE: The ultimate spiritual failure of the Pharisees, as depicted by the older brother, was that they did not embrace the Father’s mission for them, to go and seek the lost to bring them back to God. They made it hard to come home!

What about you? Is there any older brother attitudes or actions you need to repent of? Here are some points I have shared with you before that warrant repeating:

1. Older brother types specialize in identifying and exposing people’s sins and weaknesses.

The Father’s children specialize in helping people overcome their sins and weaknesses.

2. Older brother types focus on their outward conformity to rules and traditions.

The Father’s children focus on their inward conformity to the character of Christ.

3. Older brother types are primarily concerned with the blessings of membership in the Kingdom.

The Father’s children are primarily concerned with the mission of the Kingdom.

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