

## **Broken Hearts, Open Hearts, and Closed Hearts** **The Parable of the Prodigal Son Luke 15:11-32**

We come this morning to this best known and most loved of all the parables. It known widely as the parable of the prodigal son, yet he is only one of three principle characters in this story. I also imagine that many of us don't even know what the word "prodigal" means. I didn't understand what it meant until I'd been preaching a couple of years. My dictionary gives the following descriptions of the word "prodigal" *extravagant, profuse in giving, exceedingly abundant, lavish, a person given to luxury*. There is no doubt that the younger, rebellious son in our Lord's story was lavish in the way he blew his inheritance, extravagant in his waste, and luxurious in his indulgence.

Yet there is another prodigal in this story who is far more extravagant and lavish than the lost son. I'm talking about the father. He is luxurious with his love, lavish in his mercy, extravagant in his forgiveness.

This truly is the story of the prodigal father who dispenses grace with such openhanded abundance. We are given here a picture of our heavenly father who is so ready and so willing to forgive us, bestowing mercy on us in exceeding abundance. Thus we are encouraged to turn to Him ourselves, just as the younger son returned to his father, and we are invited to join in rejoicing when others turn to Him and find the forgiveness that is waiting for them there, unlike the bitter, older son.

We are not just given a view into the heart of God; however, but this picture also serves as a pattern for our own hearts to follow. There will be times in each of our lives that we will wear the sandals of each character in this story. There will be times when we are the rebellious son, when we have selfishly squandered what has been given us; when we have wronged God, or another person. Will we, like the younger son, "*come to our senses?*" There will be times when someone who has wronged us comes to us with a broken heart. Will we, like the father, respond in generous forgiveness? There will be times when we have been faithful and devoted, and some rebellious soul returns from their wandering ways. Will we, like the eldest son, look at them with a bitter, resentful eye? Let us consider each one and consider whose sandals we might be wearing this morning.

***Body:***

### **I The Youngest Son (A Broken Heart)**

We begin with the youngest son, the one we know as the prodigal son, but I want you to see him as lost son #1. He is the one who was lost, but then is found. He shows us the necessity of a broken heart. It might not be immediately apparent to us the significance of what happens in vs. 12. The younger son approaches dad, and asks for his share of the inheritance early. It is not uncommon in our day for people to get some of their inheritance early. **But in the first century Jewish culture this son might have well gone to his dad and said, "Dad, I wish you were dead, because then I could have all my loot right now."**

From the beginning we see his rebellious, selfish nature. He is only thinking of himself and what he wants out of life. It is not clear why the father grants the son's request, but one thing is sure. This son was already lost. He had already left home in his heart. He was still there physically, but his heart had left a long time ago. So rather than fighting what he could not control, dad let him go.

In this young son's departure we see a picture of our own spiritual condition. We have rebelliously and selfishly left our heavenly father. We have pursued our own desires without regard to His will. Paul tells us in Rom. 3:23 that we have "*all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" The Bible is very clear that even the very best of us does not measure up to God's absolute perfection. We might look pretty darn good compared to other sinful people. But put us side by side with a pure and holy God, not even the most warped fun house mirror, no spiritual liposuction, no moral makeover can make us look good.

It all starts off pretty good for this son. He heads off with his new bank account, credit card, and pockets stuffed full of cash. He headed off to the far country where he was sure he could buy happiness and meaning in life. Once he got there he bought himself a few friends and a few good times. They made a good substitute for happiness and meaning for a while. But when his bank account ran out, so did his friends. When his pockets became empty, so did his life.

**There is an allure to the far country. It is the spiritual version of the grass is greener on the other side. The far country is where we can do what we want.** The far country is where no one knows us and no one is there to tell us what to do. We think we can make our dreams come true in the far country. It's the place we think we can live out our fantasies.

We're not told where the far country was, and it doesn't matter. The far country is different for different people. The far country is wherever we think we can run away. The far

country is where we think we can get away from God. For Jonah, the far country was to get on a boat and sail the opposite direction from where God called him to be.

**The far country always looks enticing from a distance.** Sin can be great fun for a while. It gives us moments of pleasure. It makes our life feel exciting. There are times we all dream about going to the far country. Some of us actually go there. What do I mean? What was the attraction of the far country? It was a place he could go and no one would know him. A place he could do what he wants without embarrassment. We like the idea of living life free from consequences. We like the idea of being able to do what we want with no one to hold us accountable. For you the far country might be going to college a long way from home. It might be a divorce or a new marriage. It might be a new church, or to leave church altogether. The far country is wherever we go and whatever we do to get away from what God has called us to.

But like the young son's money, the satisfaction of this kind of life eventually runs out. Sin always catches up with you, and you find that the happiness and meaning you thought you had, were only poor substitutes for the real thing. The far country always looks good from a distance, but it always ends up being a pigsty. It begins as something glamorous, exciting and sexy, but it always ends in the mud and the stink and filth.

His own foolishness and the circumstances of life put the young son in a desperate situation. He has no money and no job, and the economy has hit the skids. His friends have left him, and no one offers him help. He finds himself working for a pig farmer, drooling over the food they ate. You have to see this through Jewish eyes. The Jews despised pigs. They were unclean animals. Even touching them made one ceremonially unclean, unable to participate in any part of the Jewish religious life. And here he found himself serving them, living with them, and eating with them.

Then it hits him. *“Even the servants at my father's house have it much better than this.”* Our text says, *“he came to his senses.”* Literally, the Greek says, “He came to himself.” When you are living in sin, when you are living far from God, you are not yourself. You are living in a place of pretend and lies. It is a deception that keeps you from finding the true you. You weren't created for sin. You weren't created to be separated from your father. Sin corrupts us and pollutes us so that we are not ourselves, as God created us to be. Listen to how Paul describes what sin does to us:

Eph 4:18-19

*They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

In our sin we are not as we should be. Hopefully, like the young son, we will reach some point low enough that we will come to our senses, and recognize our sinful condition. I call this the point of desperation. It is that point where we have nowhere else to turn, that we can lie to ourselves no longer. When we hit that point, will we turn to our father?

1 Cor 15:34

*Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning;*

**The lost son exemplifies two important steps in the salvation process. We see in him confession and repentance.** When we talk about having a heart broken before God, this is what we are talking about. It is to be broken, and to know that you are broken, and to know that God is the only one who can heal your brokenness, and to go to him.

The son recognizes the error of his ways. For the first time in a long time he is honest with himself and about himself. He admits the truth. *“Here I am starving to death.”* But he doesn’t stop there. This is important church. Many people realize at some point that they’ve seriously screwed up, but they don’t do anything with it. They just feel sorry for themselves. They wallow in pity. But the lost son decides to do something about it. Look at what he says in vs. 18, *“I will set out and go back to my father.”* He even has his speech rehearsed, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”* That's all nice. Good intentions are wonderful. Many have said they were going to do the right thing, but look at vs. 20, *“So he got up and went to his father... The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and against you.’”* He didn't just talk. He didn't just intend. He did it. That's repentance.

Repentance means to change direction. We have to recognize that we are going the wrong way, stop, and then go the other way. It is not repentance to admit that we're sinful, but then to keep going the wrong way. We must turn to our Father with every desire of leaving our sin behind. We have to recognize that we need forgiveness.

Forgiveness can sometimes be harder to seek than it is to give. It is hard to admit that we are wrong. The first and most important forgiveness we need to seek is from our heavenly father. There are also times we need to seek forgiveness from others. If you need to do either one of these this morning I urge you, come to your senses, and go. Go ask.

## **II. The Father (An Open Heart)**

The father gives us such a picture of the heart of God. If the father was like us, he might have been waiting for that day when the son came back, so he could say, "I knew it. I told you so. You got what you deserved." We would glare. We would wag our finger. We would lean back in satisfaction that we were proved right. But this father is not like that. Neither is your heavenly father.

This father is waiting expectantly, ready to forgive. We can imagine him going out on the front porch every day, looking down the road just hoping to see dusty footfalls in the distance. And one afternoon, he sees something. He squints and sure enough there is a lonely figure walking down the road. He looks ragged and weary, but he'd recognize that stride anywhere. He leaps from the porch and, forgetting all proper manners, he hikes up his skirt and he runs as fast as he can. There is no condemnation here. There is no anger here, only love and compassion, for his son has returned.

He calls for the best robe, a ring and sandals. **Do you know who would have had the best robe in the house? The best robe in the house would have been his own.** The ring signified authority, and the sandals showed that he was a free man and not a servant. His father gave him all the best.

Such is the heart of our heavenly father He is waiting expectantly for you, ready to forgive. He is actively seeking sinners. Nothing thrills God more, than when a repentant sinner returns home. He calls for the best robe, a ring and sandals. Listen to what Paul writes to the Ephesians, *"In him we have redemption through his blood the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."*

Sometimes we are in the shoes of the father. Someone comes to us for forgiveness. They have wronged us. They have wounded us with their words. They betrayed our trust. They have stabbed us in the back. They are sorry, but we are bitter. We may want revenge. We may want to rub it in. But we need to learn to let go. We need to uncross our arms and open them in understanding. We need to forgive.

Is there sin in your life that needs forgiven? Your heavenly father is waiting, not with a wagging finger, not with an accusing look, not with a turned up nose, but arms open wide with eagerness did expectation. Won't you come?

## **III. The Oldest Son (A Closed Heart)**

Lastly, we come to the oldest son. He is lost son #2. Part of us feels for him. He's paid his dues. He's done as he's been told. He's worked hard. He's been the perfect son. All of the sudden his rebellious irresponsible brother comes home and they're throwing a party. Some of us might be livid too.

He shows how a closed heart misses the grace of the father. The truth is, this son is just as lost as the first one. His heart is not in the right place. He may not have left physically, but his heart is poisoned with pride and bitterness. He was going through the motions of doing what was right, but his attitude was all wrong.

Listen closely to what the father tells the son, "*My son,*" the father said, "*You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.*" He could have had a party any time he wanted. He was so focused on his duty, that he missed the joy of being a son at home.

Oh I fear that many of us will have a hard time admitting how much like this we can be. Those of us who've been in the church our whole lives often lose sight of the joy of being saved. We find that we sometimes resent the sinner who comes home, and enjoys the same position we have. Why we've been coming every week since we were born. We've been tithing every week. We have volunteered and worked, and these new people want to come in and change things. How dare they!

Sometimes we who've been in the church a lone time get so focused on our religious duty that we forget to enjoy God's grace: We make our lives miserable and we want others to be miserable to. God's riches are available to us at any time. Sometimes I get the impression that we only want "nice" sinners in the church. What is your attitude toward sinners who come to Christ? We can be bitter and resentful, or we can join the party, for its our party too.

***Conclusion:***

There are three hearts this morning. Which one is yours? Is your heart broken? Are you ready to come home? Your heavenly Father is ready and willing and waiting. Is your heart open? Are you ready to forgive? Are you ready to receive others no matter how battered and bruised, no matter how flawed or failed, no matter how messed up and mistaken, are you ready to receive them with the same grace your heavenly father received you? Or is your heart closed. Have you been in the family so long you've forgotten the amazing grace you have? Have you lost the joy? Have you forgotten you can have a party whenever you want?

There are three pairs of sandals this morning. Which pair are you wearing?