

# HEART BURN

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## What Does God Do with a Selfish Heart?

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-24

### The Tale of Toby

The man's name was Toby. He was the youngest son of a lawyer from Cleveland who'd struck it rich and moved his family to the upscale community of Rancho Santa Fe, California, where I served as pastor. Toby's dad and mom were active members of our church. They lived in a magnificent home on a hill, with a swimming pool that overlooked fragrant citrus groves and a view of the valley that seemed to go on forever. Each year, the trust fund that Toby's dad had set up for him kicked out a handsome income that freed Toby to pursue his interests, mainly dabbling in real estate development. His father wanted his boy to be a success like he had been, to build a business, and know the joy of being in a position to help the lives of others.

This is why what happened at the poolside that morning is so puzzling. Toby came home while his mom was out playing tennis and found his father alone on the terrace. "Dad," he said, "there's this property near Las Vegas that I want very badly. It costs more than I have coming in. Can you give me the money I need to tie it up?" It was not a new conversation. Toby's father had often explained to his son that he wanted the best for him, but that it was important he learn to live within the generous means already provided. "There are more resources coming once your mom and I are gone, Toby, but for now the best we can do is help you think through how to build a life of value and integrity with the gifts you've been given."

Toby's mother later told me that this line of discourse was always upsetting to their son. She said, in effect, "Toby never liked limits. Because he knew we HAD more, he felt he should HAVE more of it. He burned through most everything we gave him and, when that was not enough, he felt like it was OUR responsibility to do whatever he believed would make him happy. When his dad said 'no' it made him very angry." That was an *understatement*. My first conversation with Toby was in the San Diego County Jail. He was there because on that sunny San Diego morning, he listened to his father set a limit one more time, then picked up one of the terracotta planters that sat by the pool, and murdered his father with it. When I asked Toby if he had any sense of what this act had done to his mom, he turned my question around: "Does SHE have ANY concept of what it is doing to me that she has now cut off all my funds?"

### The Scandal of the Selfish Son

There is a clinical word for a man like Toby: He is a sociopath. He has no empathy for others. He is obsessively concerned for his needs alone. He has a heart utterly consumed and consuming with selfishness. Thankfully, we don't run into people like

Toby all that often. But there exists in many people a milder version of Toby's extreme condition. We see it displayed in the most famous story Jesus ever told.

Most of us know the story well. Luke 15:11 reads, **"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So [the Father] divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."** As many of you know, the obvious scandal in this story is the reckless selfishness of this younger son's heart. In the culture of the ancient Middle East, to demand one's inheritance and leave before your father died, was only a small step removed from bashing your father over the head with a terracotta planter.

It was a staggering sign of disrespect and disregard for who this father is and all he had done for him. It was a bald statement that the only thing he really valued about his dad was the older man's capacity to satisfy his wishes. He didn't care about being close to his father or learning from him. He didn't give a whit about helping his dad's estate prosper and grow. He doesn't shed a tear over what going his own way does to the heart of the father who loves him and longs for his company. He doesn't care that his Father's good name is dragged through the mud by his stunning self-absorption. This son doesn't give a cow-pie for how his choice of his private pathway weakens the coherence and functioning of the whole family or society. No, he just sets all of that on fire and walks away.

Some of us have known people like this – maybe not as bad as Toby – but people with very selfish hearts, nonetheless. Sometimes, if we listen deeply to those closest to us or are ruthlessly honest with ourselves, we recognize that there is something of this younger son in us as well. Our spiritual Adversary has lit a fire of selfish rebellion in us. The matchsticks he's used have been these lies: "You are on your own." "Your Father can't be trusted." His "limits hurt you." As the flames in our heart get higher, we start to burn our way through moral or legal regulations, through personal relationships, or through the financial or physical resources entrusted to us for better purposes. More and more the crackling questions at the center of our lives become: "What's in it for me?" "How do I get mine?" "Why are you stopping me?"

One of the evidences of this burning is just how HOT we get at the suggestion we've got a problem. "How dare you pretend to know me? How dare you judge me? I'm a good person. I'm nowhere near as selfish as a lot of people I know." But how much do our hearts *really* care for the Father's will or way? Can we name even FIVE significant sacrifices or basic changes in orientation that we've made to align ourselves further with the Father's heart? How about three? Two? One?

Do we spend our money, use our tongues, handle conflict, allocate our time, welcome strangers in the pattern of humility and servanthood Christ taught and modeled. Or is

God useful to us so long as he meets our needs and doesn't demand much? Are the others in the family OK, so long as they don't challenge our behavior or test our patience? Here's the truth: Many of us style ourselves on the outside as "Christians" but, on the inside where God is looking, we are mainly "consumers," burning our way along. Like Toby, or the younger son in this parable, we may visit the Father's home – looking for what else he might dish out to us – but in our hearts, we are citizens of the **"distant country."**

### **The Scandal of the Extravagant God**

We don't know how long it had been this way for the younger son in Christ's story. We do know, however, that there came a day when he had burned through **"everything,"** the Bible says. He had thought he would find his heart's desire by obeying the law of selfishness, but because his god was his appetite, now all he was left with was heartburn. Friends had been plentiful when he was in the high-consuming season of life, but now he found himself hungry, desperate, alone. And then, **"he came to his senses."** "Gosh," he thinks, "the very servants in my Father's house have it better than this." **"I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father."**

Can you imagine what would have happened if Toby's father had survived that assault on his head and – more importantly – that assault on his heart by the poolside? Can you imagine what he would have said or done if, years later, Toby suddenly walked back through the door of that home? On a far vaster scale, I struggle to imagine what the heavenly Father would do, if you or I really came to our senses about how selfish we have been and still are and tried to come home. After I've so violently rejected his heart and run from his company.... After I've so poorly soaked up his character and so badly embarrassed the family name... After how weakly I've cared for the extension of his estate or really considered the needs of my brother... How would the Father respond to me (or you) if we suddenly came trudging up the driveway toward home?

We don't have to imagine it, because Jesus tells us. **"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."** The child blurts out a deep and humble confession. He doesn't expect to be treated as anything but pond scum on his father's farm." But before he can even finish his speech, his dad interrupts: "No such thing, you are my child and I want the best for you. **'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast... For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'** So they began to celebrate.

My friends, we and many others worldwide are united in a stunning communion today. Like the Prodigals we've met today, we find ourselves by the poolside again in the presence of a Father against whose glory, honor, and kingdom our hearts have burned with selfishness, even if we are still so sin-blinded that we hardly perceive the truth. There is every just reason to fear now his righteous fury. Yet when He stoops down and picks up the empty terracotta planter, it is not to smash us with it, but rather to ladle from the pool of his heart, stained with his blood, wave after wave of amazing grace. If this truth doesn't start to douse the fire of selfishness that has been burning within us... If that doesn't make our hearts eager once more to become like Dad's... What will?

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## What Does God Do with a Selfish Heart?

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-24

*How's Your Heart? (Part 4)*

### Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Where do you see people today burning through regulations (moral boundaries), relationships, or resources today?
2. What are one or two of the most selfish, rebellious, or consumptive things you've personally done? What motivates these actions?
3. Why would a God who sets regulations for wise reasons, who cherishes relationships, and who calls us to be responsible stewards of resources, ever forgive you for what you've done?
4. How do you understand the relationship between obedience to God and acceptance by God? Which comes first in this parable?
5. What is the "gospel" (good news) that Christians across the world share?
6. What orientation and behavior would you expect from the younger brother going forward? Why so?