

- For those that were not here last week, we are spending three weeks in the story of the prodigal son.
 - It is one of the most famous of all the parables that Jesus taught and is a parable with three main players. A younger son (after which the parable gets its name), an elder son and a father. Last week we looked at the younger son and today we will spend our time on the elder son.
 - If you recall, the younger son took his part of the inheritance, which was a slap in the face of his father. He took it to a distant country and wasted it all. When he reached the end of himself, he remembered that he was the son of his father and returned home, even though he wasn't sure what kind of reception he was going to get.
 - But come home he did. Yet that is not the end of the parable.
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- I have shared my story with you over the years.
 - I was fortunate and blessed to grow up in a family that loved each other, loved God and lived well. I was sheltered and disciplined. I was encouraged and challenged. I wouldn't trade it for anything.
 - Yet I found this life most difficult in my teenage years.
 - I was taught to do right. To make good choices. To follow Jesus. To be a part of church and youth group. To pray and read my bible. To not get carried away.
 - What I found was that it was lonely.
 - I saw the kids at school being popular, invited to parties, talking about the exploits of the weekend (which usually involved sex and alcohol). And I found myself a little but jealous. It looked like fun.
 - Even with the Christian kids I hung out with. They dated more. Stayed out later. Did things that I had been raised not to do or was not allowed to do. So I was an outsider even then.
 - What began to build in me over time, even though I did not know it, was a self-righteous pride. Oh, it didn't come out in obvious ways, but more subtly.
 - I would judge those who were not as disciplined.
 - I dismissed Christ-followers who did not follow the rules the way I did.
 - I was convinced that the way I did life was the only way.
 - This carried into my early adult years.
 - Other people had problems because they made dumb choices. I had little compassion or empathy for those who had issues because if they had done as I had done, they wouldn't be in that position.
 - I dismissed the world around me as unhappy people with no purpose, even though at times it would seem that they were having a lot more fun than I was having.
 - I would diminish other Christ-followers and their way of worship and living, even though at times it seemed as though they were a lot more fruitful and joyful than I was.
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- When I was honest, especially when things weren't going well, I would find myself questioning God. Why was I having issues? Why was I not being rewarded as I thought for my good life and good choices? How come I couldn't be as joyful as others? How come I was the only one "really" committed? What was the problem with everyone else?
 - I would alternate between guilt when I messed up and pride when I didn't.
 - And far more often than I wish was true, I was living the life of the older brother in the story of the prodigal son that we will look at.
 - Every single one of us has this in us.
 - That feeling of frustration on why others can't seem to get over their problems and should just quit complaining and do it already.

- That questioning of others and their motives.
- That feeling of superior character, of being a better father, mother, wife or husband.
- That small superiority that lingers in the back of our minds as we look at our co-workers.
- That frustration that others who do nothing seem to have it easier or better than me who does so much more.
- An irritation or anger that others are not be called to account for their sinful practices or suffering any consequences from them.
- Because it is so subtle and so much based on our own good lives, it is so very difficult to identify and root out.
- Just like a wayward, younger son needs to return home, so does this good, decent, hard-working older son who is lost and has left home even though he never went anywhere.

20 So he got up and went to his father. "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. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

- Yet what we are going to see is that just like with the younger son, the father was moving towards the elder son, inviting him in. He loved him just as much as the younger son.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.** This truth might even be more important to the elder son in me than anything else.

I. I can choose to leave home even as I stay.

- The older brother never followed his younger brother's footsteps. He did not leave. He stayed home with his father. He worked hard. He picked up the slack. He honored his father. Yet when his son comes home, that side that was ugly bubbled to the surface.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

- How would we describe the older brother? What words would you use to talk about him?
- Proud. Angry. Spiteful. Full of himself. Bitter. Jealous.
- I think the word that encapsulates him is this: resentful.

A. I leave home when I become resentful.

- If you pulled up to your house at the end of work, and there were cars everywhere. You couldn't park in the driveway. You could see people streaming into the house. You could

see all the lights on. There were decorations on the mailbox. You could see people inside and you could hear them in the backyard. You could smell the burgers on the barbecue from a block away. You could hear the music, the laughter, the talking. What would you do.

- I would go straight to the door to go in. This sounds fun. You would want to know what's going on and why the party.
- Do you notice what the elder son does. He hears the party and sends a servant to find out about it. It's his place!
- Is there a pattern of avoiding or being reluctant to celebrate?
- I've been excluded again. Someone didn't tell me what is going on. I was kept out of the good things. If it's that fun, I'm not sure it's good.
- He doesn't strike you as a joyful person, does he? Do you know someone like that? Is this you?
- Joy and resentment cannot coexist. The music and dancing, instead of inviting hi to joy, become a cause for even greater withdrawal.
- The older son has become a foreigner in his own house.
- How many oldest children do we have here today. How many of you feel like your younger siblings had it easier than you? Mom and dad expected less? They got away with more? They had all the fun while you were the responsible one?
- Look at why the elder son is resentful.

29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

- The older brother was angry, not because his brother was back, but by what his father had done and not done.
- He was resentful of the younger son who got to spend everything and do what he wanted with "no consequences." Resentful of his father for not exacting his pound of flesh or giving him, the hardworking son, favored treatment.
- Here is the problem with resentment. It is attached to the flip side of my virtue which makes it very difficult to root out.
- After all, isn't it good to be obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, hardworking and self-sacrificing? Yet it seems that my resentments are tied to such praiseworthy attitudes.
- When I want to be selfless, I find myself obsessed with being loved and appreciated.
- When I give of myself totally to a task, I find myself questioning why others don't give themselves the way I do.
- When I finally think I have a handle of overcoming my temptations, I feel envious of those who give in to theirs.
- In the midst of his resentment, **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS HIM.**

B. I leave home when my identity is tied to my virtue.

- Just like the younger son had identity issues, so did the elder son.
- We are told that when he heard the party he was coming back from working in the fields.
- Even now he is being dutiful. Not wasting time. Doing and accomplishing what needs to get done to keep the estate in good shape. Perhaps he is working extra hours because of what the younger son caused.
- Remember the younger son had this speech about coming home and working as one of the servants?

29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

- Those are the words of someone defined by what he did. By his good works. He is using the language of a servant, not a son.
- He wanted his father to give him something to celebrate with “his friends”. Not with his father. He wants his own rewards and blessings apart from his father.
- Just as you cannot find your identity in leaving home and looking for it through other places and things, you cannot find it in being good. It simply leads to pride and resentment and in the end:

C. He got caught in the comparison trap.

29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

- He is preoccupied with with fairness. When you find yourself saying to yourself or out loud, especially when thinking of another person, “That’s not fair!”, it should be a warning light to you.
- A preoccupation with fairness, with comparing blessings, results, etc had a deadly result and we see it in v30. “This son of yours” puts distance between himself and his brother AND himself and his father.
- He isolates himself. He feels sorry for himself. It makes us accusatory. Our resentment boils over.
- The response of the father demonstrates again that **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS HIM** just like he does for me.

II. I can choose to return home.

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. . . 31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

- The father is “pleading” with his son to come in. He wants him at the party. He is begging him to “come home.”

A. I return home by trusting in who I am.

- The father points out that the elder son has missed the entire point. He always had access to the party, to everything. He wasn’t withholding anything.
- The father does not love the younger son more than the older.
- He calls him son (literally “child”).
- The father does not defend or accuse. He simply stresses his relationship with his son – you have always been with me.
- The son’s self-esteem is painfully wounded by his father’s joy.
- The joy and the dramatic return of the younger son is NO way means that the elder son was less loved, less appreciated, less favored. The father loves both with a complete love.
- Out the outside the elder son did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but inside, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree. He
- The obedient and dutiful life of which I am proud or for which I am praised feels, sometimes, like a burden that was laid on my shoulders and continues to oppress me, even when I have

accepted it to such a degree that I cannot throw it off. Obedience and duty have become a burden and service has become slavery.

- Don't miss this important point. *The son was trying to earn something that was already his.*
- This is all yours. It's always been yours. I am with you and I love you. Don't worry about others or about earning it. You are my son.
- Without trust, I cannot let myself be found. Trust is that deep inner conviction that the Father wants me home. As long as I doubt that I am worth finding and put myself down as less loved than my younger brothers and sisters, I cannot be found.
- We have to repeat to ourselves that God loves you, wants you home and cannot rest unless he has you with him. There is a strong, dark voice in me that says the opposite. "God isn't really interested in me. He takes me for granted. I don't expect him to give me what I really want." **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.** How do I move towards him? By embracing my identity in him and:

B. I return home by practicing gratitude.

- The son was preoccupied with himself. He was angry. He was uncaring. He was resentful.
- The elder son's complaint is from a heart that feels it never received what it was due.
- Complaining is self-perpetuating and counterproductive.
- It's what kept the son out of the party. He is suspicious. He has lost his ability to have spontaneous joy.
- Key idea: *The older son lost sight of what was important to his father* – what was important to himself became more important than what was important to the father.
- Gratitude is the opposite of resentment.
- The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.
- The choice of gratitude rarely comes without some significant effort.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**
- Just like with the younger son, Jesus does not resolve the story. How the story ends for each of the sons is up to them! We are left face to face with a hard spiritual choice. To trust or not trust in God's all-forgiving love.
- The father's amazing love is not dependent on how the story ends. It simply is.
- God is always there, always ready to give and forgive, absolutely independent of our response. God's love does not depend on our repentance or our inner or outer changes.
- The key question facing the elder brother and faces the elder brother in us: Am I willing to acknowledge that I am not better than my brother?
- The younger son tied his identity to his failure.
- The elder son tied his identity to his success.
- Both were lost. Our enemy uses both to draw us away from home.
- I wonder which does more damage?
- There is so much judgment, condemnation and prejudice among the saints. There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding "sin."
- Jesus models the way the older and younger son *should* be.
- He left his true home. Went to a foreign country. Gave away all he had. Returned through the cross to his father's home. Not as a rebellious son, but as an obedient son. He lived the long and painful journey that he himself describes in this parable.
- His journey is what makes it possible for us to return home.
- When he went through it all and returned to heaven, God said "Quick. Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; let us eat and

celebrate! Because my children who, as you know, were dead have returned to life; they were lost and have been found again! My prodigal Son has brought them all back.”

- Jesus is also the true elder son. He is the beloved son who lives in complete communion with the Father, with no suspicion, fear or distance.
- All God has belongs to the Son and the Son did nothing without the Father. He perfectly obeyed his father as a beloved son, not a servant.
- He is sent by the Father to reveal God’s unrelenting love for all his resentful children and to offer himself as the way home.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**
- Trust in your identity in Jesus. Practice gratitude. Respond to his invitation. Come back next week for the conclusion of this series as we look at the Father and how he is inviting us to become more like him.