

Good morning everyone.

Wow, I like that response. I am Grant Gardner. I'm the middle school minister here at SOCC. So it is National Youth Pastors Day, as they say. So I get to spend a lot of time hanging out and getting to invest in students grades 6 through 8.

I love student ministry and I love getting to both teach and learn from this young generation and see their faith in action. And so as a middle school minister, I think one of the most important things I can teach students is to the importance of reading the Bible for yourself. Every week during the 9:30 service, middle school students gather for what we call the middle to dive in and learn how to read Scripture for themselves. And our middle school students have actually read through three books of the Bible this year in depth. We read through Romans, we read through Genesis, and we just finished up our series on the Book of Judges, which was both fun and challenging if you've ever read Judges.

But why do I bring all of that up? Well, because I believe reading the Bible for yourself isn't just essential for students. I believe it's essential for adults as well. In Second Timothy 3, 16, 17, it says, all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be completely equipped for every good work. So as I'm prepared to teach today, my hope is that you, as the church are, would follow along with me through the Scriptures so that God would use my words to encourage you in your faith and so that you guys would also hold me accountable to staying in line with God's word.

And so, all that being said, let me pray for us as we begin today. Jesus, I just pray that you would be with me in my words. Lord, I'm unworthy to be here today, to be teaching others, but Lord, you redeemed the unworthy and you used them for your kingdom, Lord. So may you use me. May you guide my words.

There's so many things that I want to say and thought about saying, but would you help the right words to come today? And would it be your words and not mine? And would you lead these people on the path towards righteousness? Amen.

So the topic that we're going to be covering today is he became our Savior. And so throughout this series we've been looking into what Jesus became for us. And as we celebrate the season of his miraculous birth, this is a topic that I was very excited to tackle because it's one I'm very passionate about. So today we're going to be kind of jumping around to a couple different passages, but we're mainly going to be taking an in depth look at Luke 15, 1132. So if you could go there, like I said or Quentin said earlier, there's pew Bibles in front of you.

It's page 740 if you don't have your own Bible or Bible app. But this passage is sometimes referred to as the parable of the Prodigal Son. And if you've never heard of a parable before, a parable is just a story that is told, usually by Jesus to help illustrate a point that the teacher wanted to make. And Jesus used parables throughout his ministry. Parables provide a way for us to experience a lesson and not just hear one.

And so if you've been keeping up with tech news lately, you would know that Netflix just acquired Warner Bros. And discovery in an \$83 billion deal. That's billion with a B. And so that deal alone should show us just an idea of how much of a story driven culture we are. We love stories and Jesus knows this about us. I mean, he created us.

And this parable is perhaps one of Jesus most famous parables in his ministry. So let's get into it. We start off our parable in verse 11 by reading that there is a man with two sons. And in verse 12 we read that the younger son is asking his father for the share of the estate or the inheritance. And this would have been a rude thing to maybe do in our culture.

But to fully understand the implications of what the younger son is doing here, we have to understand the culture at this time. Family was a huge deal within Jewish culture. The father's family line would have been carried out through his sons. The sons would also participate in taking care of their father's estate. And so as well as you know, even in our culture, inheritance is something that's only received after the father would have died.

So by asking for his share of the inheritance early, what he is essentially saying is that his father is dead to him, he's never coming back, and he's going to neglect his duties to take care of his father's household. So within the first two verses, the original audience would have already understood that this younger son is a rebellious and wicked son. And this is only proved more as we continue on with the parable. In verse 13 we read that he went off to a distant country and he squandered his wealth and wild living. And it's not long after the moment that the rebellious son had wished his father was dead, that he then takes his inheritance and he completely wastes all of it on meaningless things.

So much so that in verse 14, when a famine hits the land, he has nothing left to take care of himself. And for the kids in the room, a famine just means there was not a lot of food for the people. And so we read in verse 15 that he is so in need that he hires himself out to a citizen of that country who sends him then into the field to feed pigs. And then in verse 16, we read that he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. And so this is another important culture timeout.

In the Old Testament, God declared pigs to be unclean animals. Israelites were not supposed to raise pigs. They were not supposed to eat pigs. They weren't even really supposed to touch pigs. And so as a result, over time, pigs became like a disgusting animal to the Israelite people.

I've heard a rabbi say before that the Israelites view of a pig could be compared to our view of something like a cockroach. The younger son is in such a bad place that he's willing to take care of one of the most disgusting animals of their culture. And he's so hungry that he longs to eat the slop that the pigs eat. It's safe to say that he is not having a good time. But then an important realization happens within the next few verses.

Luke 15, 17, 19 says, when he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? And here I am, starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.

And in my opinion, this is one of the most overlooked sections of this parable. And it actually possesses something that I think is essential for us to grasp. And so as we talk here today, I think there are three big roadblocks that every Christian must work through to fully accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. And here we kind of get to see a glimpse of hope within this wicked son and how he approaches the first two roadblocks. And so to get us thinking, when I was in high school, I went to Bloomington High School south, and yep, shout out.

My sophomore year was my first year there as I moved schools after my freshman year. And during my sophomore year, I had sea lunch, which meant that I had the last lunch of the day. And I'm not a morning person, so in high school, I rarely ate breakfast. So by the time sea lunch rolled around, I was getting pretty hungry. And this was also around the time that I hit my growth spurt, and I grew about 8 inches that year.

So I found out that since my class was on the first floor next to the cafeteria, I could run down during a lunch or hop in line for a burrito because it was the shortest line, and then scarf it down before class and hold myself over until my real lunch later. Now, some of you might be asking, why don't you just pack a snack or something? And I did mention that I was in high school, so sorry. But one day I scarfed down my burrito before class, but for whatever reason, it decided to throw a party in my stomach, and it was not the good kind. So I'm sitting in Spanish class with a stomach ache, fighting for my life, when my Spanish teacher decided today of all days was a good day for us to just do some silent reading.

It's also worth noting that I sat right next to my crush on the assigned seating, which seemed like a score at the beginning of the year, but now it was starting to seem like it wasn't very cool. So the whole class goes silent. I go to pick up my Spanish book from the bag, and suddenly the winds could no longer be contained. What came out of me in that moment was probably the loudest sound I've ever heard. At least that's what it felt like.

And those blue chair contraptions, they only amplify that sound. And so within an instant, I had 30 sets of eyes just staring at me. And I knew in this moment, there was no going back. There was only one thing that I could do. I simply raised my hand and I said, yep, that was me.

To which the entire class, including my Spanish teacher, erupted in laughter. And I tried to act like it wasn't a big deal, but deep down, I felt really embarrassed. And it wouldn't be a middle school lesson without there being a fart story, so I had to tell that. But I tell you guys that story, because that is the moment that you have to make a choice. All of us are sinners, and all of those close to you can see it and maybe smell it.

But can you own up to it? The first big roadblock that every Christian must deal with is can you acknowledge your spiritual depravity? Or to put it in simpler terms, can you acknowledge that you are sinful, that you're wicked and rebellious? I think when it comes to the Gospel, many people out there really like the idea of, of Jesus coming to save them from this broken world or take them out of this place filled with heartbreak and tragedy and take them to a paradise with no tears or no pain. But while Jesus does save us from the brokenness of this world, he also saves us from the brokenness of ourselves.

It's easy to see the brokenness of the world around us and see things like school shootings or political assassinations, racism, or so many other things that we think we're so separate from all of those things. But we are part of that brokenness too. And I don't say that from a place of condemnation like as a minister, that that somehow doesn't also apply to myself. I am a horrible sinner. I've lied and I've cheated people.

I have a horribly quick temper that has caused me to hurt many people over the course of my life. I struggle daily with pride and selfishness and putting my own wants and desires over everyone else. And I could sit here all day and talk about my sin in detail. But the point is, we're all sinful and broken. And this is where Christianity loses a lot of people.

There are many people out there, probably some even in this room, that feel as though you are not that sinful. You feel as though you're generally a good person. And I ask you in particular to hear me out on this because it's important to understanding the true gospel. In fact,

we can see the importance of this throughout the Book of Acts. As the Gospel is proclaimed in the second chapter of Acts during Pentecost, Peter stands up and proclaims to the crowd at the very beginning that the Messiah that they've long awaited for for thousands of years, he actually lived among them, was justified through his miraculous works, and yet they sentenced him to death and they crucified him.

Peter wanted the crowd to understand the gravity of their sin and their need for repentance before anything else. The common language that you'll see throughout the New Testament, especially when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is shared, is repent and believe. And it's not a super popular message. In fact, almost every single time the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in the Book of Acts, it's met with violent opposition. It's a roadblock to accepting the gospel for a reason.

But I think what makes it extra hard for people in accepting this truth is that we tend to only compare ourselves with other people. We compare ourselves to our friends, to our neighbors, even people we see on reality tv and to let you guys in on a secret. If you analyze someone's life enough, you're going to find faults, and doing so creates this false sense of false superiority. For example, I like playing basketball, and if you put me in a game with a bunch of first graders, I look like I was pretty good. But if you put me in a game against LeBron, I would look like I've never played basketball in my life.

Shout out to Tim for putting those together. It's easy to feel like a good, moral person when you're comparing yourself to other sinners and their faults. It's easy to think that our faults are somehow different or better than other people's. But it's not so easy when you compare yourself to Jesus. Jesus never sinned.

Jesus never had a lustful thought. Jesus never disobeyed the word of God. Jesus never had greed or selfishness. Jesus was perfect. And that is the standard by which God judges us.

We are not measured up to one another, but we are measured up to the perfect Son of God who Never sinned. Matthew 5:48 says, Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. And so that's the standard set by the Creator of the universe. And this is how all of us measure up. Romans 3:23 says, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but if this is the case, what hope is there?

And that's the doctrine that separates Christianity from every major world religion. There's a minister named Paul Washer who captures this idea very well. So I'm going to paraphrase what he says on it, but he says that if an interviewer were to interview people from every major world religion and ask them how they're going to heaven or paradise, this is how they might respond. The Muslim would say that they have

followed the Quran and they've served Allah faithfully. The Jewish man might say that he lived a moral life and he obeyed the Torah.

But the true Christian would respond by saying, all I have done in my life is rebel and turn away from God. I'm a horrible sinner. And the interviewer might stop them and say, well, then, how do you think you're going to heaven? And the true Christian would respond by saying, by the grace of God, it is a gift that I do not deserve. I have been saved.

Church if you don't understand your own sinfulness and your need for God, then how can Jesus be your savior? If you're not destined for destruction on your own, then why do you need Jesus? Jesus Being our Savior means we need saving. And this is the building block on which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is built. It's not complete if you stop there, but it will never be built, period, if you can't start there.

We all need Jesus. And so if we're able to acknowledge our sinfulness and our need for Jesus, the next big stumbling block to accepting the Gospel is can you acknowledge your position before God and hate your sin? I grew up always viewing hate as a bad word, and in most contexts it is. But when it comes to our sin, God actually calls us to have a righteous hatred towards our own sin. Romans 12, verse 9 says, Love must be sincere.

Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. Now this is a more complex idea and it comes with a little bit of caution. God is not calling you to live in shame and pointless self loathing. He's calling you to recognize the seriousness of your sin and to feel remorse and conviction. God, I hate that I abused your grace.

I hate that I sinned against you. Once again, the act of repentance means to turn back or to turn towards God. And maybe we can get to a spot where we acknowledge that yes, we're sinful, but we don't really feel any type of remorse for our sin. And that's the idea. We can't just acknowledge our sin, but we must understand its significance.

We are rebelling against the Almighty God and attempting to steal his position. When we go our own way, the stars, the ocean, the plants, the animals, everything in our universe does as God commands. And yet we stand up and we rebel against him in our sin. That should bring weight and conviction to our hearts. And we see the younger brother move past both of these stumbling blocks.

He not only acknowledges his sin, but he understands his position in relation to the Father. He understands that he's not even really worthy to come back at all. But if his Father would just take him back as a servant, it would be a gift of tremendous grace. So he turns back towards his Father and he makes the journey back home. And in verse 21, we see the Son start his speech and acknowledge his spiritual

depravity.

But before that, we see in verse 20 that while the Son was still a far way off, the Father ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. And I want us to hold onto that moment for a second, because while it's an amazing moment, there's more to it. So the Son is giving his big speech in 21, but his father responds by saying this in verse 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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Have a feast and celebrate. For the son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. And so this is another culture timeout.

Because the father meets his son out on the road, not just because he loves him that much, but because he has to. By law, a rebellious child was to be stoned by the elders of the community. The younger son deserved death for his rebellion and wild living. So when his father puts the best robe on him and he also puts the ring on his finger, what he's actually doing is putting the family signet ring on him. The father is giving up his own identity to his son.

He is telling the community and the elders to treat the son as if he were the father. And so the younger son is taking on his father's identity. It's a powerful moment that displays just how lavish the grace of God really is. In Romans chapter 4, 4 through 5, it says, now, to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God, who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

You see, when we place our faith in Jesus, we are not owed salvation by any work of ourselves, but it is a gift. And when we accept that gift, it's not as if we magically transform and become righteous, but we are clothed in the identity of Jesus, and God declares us to be righteous. When God sees us, he no longer sees the rebellious sinner deserving of his wrath. He sees the image of His Son reflected in us. In First John, chapter 3:1, 2, it says, See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.

And that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. God doesn't just save us from his wrath and his justice towards sin, but he elevates us to the position of children of God.

We are co heirs with Christ Himself. And when we understand that we didn't even really deserve to be forgiven in the first place, it becomes even more amazing that God doesn't just save us, but he calls

us his sons and daughters. Do you understand how amazing that grace is that God gave us to finish our parable? We Read in verse 25 about the older son. He was working in the field when all of this was going down, meaning that he was taking care of his father's estate and doing what he should be doing.

In verse 26, the older son asks what all this commotion is about, and a servant tells him. And in verse 28, we read that the older son became angry and refused to go in to celebrate his brother's return. And his father came out to plead with him to join them. And so we read this. 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.

But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, come home, you killed a fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, you were always with me and everything I have is yours. 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. In contrasting fashion, we see the older son appear as the good son all throughout the story until the end.

You see where the younger son was able to push past those roadblocks to accepting the gospel the older son was not. And Jesus gave this parable to the Jewish people, particularly the order of the Pharisees, who were very devout followers of the Old Testament law. The Pharisees were much like the older son in the story in that they get 90% of it so right. They were so devoted in their worship and their obedience of the law. But they missed the most important part.

They have no humility. They did not recognize their own spiritual depravity and their own need for Jesus. The older brother was using his father in just the same way that the younger son was. He might have stayed with his father and helped him out, but his relationship was built on what the father could give him. He wasn't thankful for the relationship that they shared, only the possessions that he missed out on.

The older brother was looking forward to when his father would die too, and he would receive his inheritance. He just wasn't as bold to come out and say it. Both are equally sinful, and yet the father still demonstrates his love for them both. And this is where we get to our final stumbling block to accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when Satan has lost these first two battles, this kind of becomes his last ditch effort.

The third roadblock to accepting the gospel is can you believe in God's forgiveness? I've seen this so many times in both adults and in students, and to be honest, in myself. You have a moment of great repentance and spiritual renewal and you're on fire for the Lord. And

you begin making all these changes in your life, and you begin experiencing the richness of being in God's presence. And then life happens.

Over time, those spiritual hides, they begin to fade and they're replaced with questions of doubt over time, old habits that you swore you were going to quit for good this time, they creep back into your life. You make mistakes and you fail. And Sean said it a couple weeks ago, but sometimes, maybe we can believe that the forgiveness of God exists for other people, but not ourselves. Sometimes you and I can be the older brother to ourselves. Really, God?

You're going to forgive me again? After all I did to betray you? And we begin to believe the lie that we can't be forgiven. So we lose heart and we give up. But the life of a Christian, it isn't just one big moment of repentance.

The life of a Christian is hard. It's the daily dying to ourselves and taking up our cross. Daily life. A marriage is not just one big ceremony. It's a commitment over a lifetime.

And the devil is going to do his best to make us feel as though we can't be forgiven. But praise be to God that forgiveness is a promise, not a feeling. So let me emphasize that point again because it's so important to understand. Forgiveness is a promise, not a feeling. It's a capital t. Truth.

Psalms 103, 1012 says, he does not treat us as our sins, deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far he has removed our transgressions from us. The last roadblock is one of the hardest to accept. We continually have to encourage one another with the word of God and remind one another that it is true.

Because it becomes so easy to believe that it's not. The work of a Christian is not easy. Living these things out is not easy, but it is so worth it. In Matthew, chapter 5, verses 3 through 12, Jesus lists out what we call the Beatitudes. And in these, I think we can see the picture of what we've been talking about today.

So it says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And if we look at that, we can see that idea of spiritual depravity, admitting that you need Jesus. The next says, blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, mourning over our sin, looking at our sin and having conviction and remorse for it. Mourning. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Looking at your position in relation to God, humbling yourself. And finally, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

for they will be filled, going to Jesus, making him your Lord and Savior. And after that moment, you can begin to see the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Followers of Jesus, when they're impacted, they understand the grace that was given to them.

And so they can go out and give that grace to others. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. When you turn to God, he will begin to replace the desires in your hearts for those of his desires. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. When we have the Holy Spirit with us, we can walk into uncomfortable situations and we can bring peace.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. The life of a Christian is not easy, and Jesus never promises us it will be. We might lose a lot of things here on this earth because of our faith, but it says, great is your reward in heaven.

And as we end today, I want to look at Matthew, chapter 121 23, as we just experienced the Christmas season. It says, she will give birth to a son, and you are going to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. All of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. So if you're looking for a way to respond today, one way you can do so is we have communion here up front and in the back.

And we have these cups with juice and bread. And in one of Jesus final moments with his disciples, before he went to the cross, he sat down and they had a meal together. And he broke the bread and he said, this is my body broken for you. And then he took the cup and he said, this is My blood poured out for the forgiveness of your sins. And so when we take communion as a community, we remember Jesus because he said, do this in remembrance of me.

And so we remember that it is only through his sacrifice that we have been saved. We remember that as we join in communion, we're joining in Christ's sacrifice, that we go out and we seek to live like him and give up ourselves. And so I encourage you, if you believe in that hope and that message, I encourage you to take communion. There's also a couple other ways you can respond. There's people around the room who have orange lanyards on, and they'd be willing to pray for you.

And so if you have something heavy on your heart that you need to get off your chest and you want to talk to somebody, you can go to one of

them. Or maybe you just need prayer right now for something going on. I encourage you to do that. Another way you can participate is after I get off this stage and stop talking, you can worship together and praise God for the grace that you've been given. And so, however you respond, I'm gonna pray, and then you're welcome to do what you need to do.

Jesus, my words are not enough, but would you make up for my weakness? Would you work in the hearts of everyone here, including myself? May we run to you. May we daily give up ourselves and depend on you. Lord, help us in our weakness.

Lord, please be made strong. Thank you. Amen.