**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE REJOICING GOD**

**PART II**

**Luke 15:11-32**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we look at one of Jesus’ most famous parables in all of Scripture, commonly known as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”. Pastor and author Tim Keller, who wrote an entire book on this parable about ten years ago, said this about it:

“I have seen more people encouraged, enlightened, and helped by this passage, when I explained the true meaning of it, than by any other text.”

I should acknowledge at the outset that I owe a great debt to Tim Keller and his book *The Prodigal God* for many of the insights about this parable that I will be sharing with you today.

The word “prodigal” means “reckless spending”. It’s spending without concern for the consequences. It’s like a gambling addict in a casino. He knows that, if he keeps playing, he risks losing all that he has, but he goes on and gambles anyways until he’s lost every last penny. That’s what being prodigal looks like.

The parable of the prodigal son is about a young man who leaves home and lives like a prodigal, but then he returns home. Jesus’ original audience would have expected him to be shamed, but that’s not what happens. Instead of shame, the father shows him compassion as he warmly welcomes him back into the family with a big celebration. It’s a simple but powerful narrative that has inspired people for centuries and the term “prodigal son” has become part of popular culture.

And yet, it’s a little misleading to call it “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” because there’s another son in the parable. He’s the older son who stayed home, working dutifully and responsibly for his father all the years his brother was gone, and he’s not happy at his younger brother’s return. In fact, he’s furious, and he refuses to join the celebration, despite his father’s pleas.

The parable is about two sons who lived two very different lives, and yet they shared the same problem: they were distant from their father. One was prodigal, the other was proud, but neither of them were in a right relationship with their father. Since the father in the parable obviously stands for God, Jesus is saying that, just as there’s more than one way to be alienated from your parents, there’s also more than one way to be alienated from God.

This is why a better title for this parable may be “The Parable of the Two Sons”, or even “The Parable of the Two *Lost* Sons.” In fact, Jesus actually begins the parable by saying, “There was a man who had *two* sons.” Jesus clearly wants us to focus equally on both sons, so that is what we’re going to do.

This is Part II of a sermon I preached last Sunday called **The Rejoicing God.** This parable forms a unit with the two parables we looked at last Sunday: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and now the parable of the lost sons.

My aim today, as it was last week, is to show you that **God Celebrates the Salvation of Sinners and Wants Us to Join the Party.**

This sermon will be broken up into three sections:

1. The Younger Brother
2. The Older Brother
3. The Faithful Brother

(1) **THE YOUNGER BROTHER**

The parable begins with an incredibly bold statement from the younger brother to his father in verse 12: “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” The younger brother is boldly demanding his inheritance. We all know how inheritances work. Children receive their inheritance from their parents after their parents die. But in the parable, the father’s not dead. He’s very much alive, and yet his younger son wants his share of the inheritance right now. “*Give me* the share of property that is coming to me,” he says. He’s so bold and so callous that he doesn’t even ask for it. “Can I have my inheritance now?” would have been bold. “*Give me* my inheritance” is just plain mean.

By demanding his inheritance now while his father was still alive, the younger brother was essentially saying that he wished his dad were dead. He doesn’t care about his father. He only cares about his father’s things, and he’s not ashamed to admit it. He may as well have spat in his father’s face.

How would the father respond? Would he respond with anger, perhaps cutting his son off from the inheritance altogether by disowning him? No. He decides to do what his son tells him to do. And so, he tallies up his net worth, divides it by three, and sells whatever possessions or land he owned in order to give his younger son one-third of his life savings and property, with the other two-thirds being reserved for the older son.

With moneybags in hand, the young man wastes no time. Jesus tells us in verse 13 that “the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.”

Just like that, one-third of his father’s life savings went down the sewer. Jesus doesn’t tell us what he spent all his money on, and we don’t need to know. All we need to know is that his money was *squandered*. It was *wasted*. He didn’t invest it. He didn’t use it to help him start a business. He didn’t use it to support his family. He used all of it on pleasures that come and go, and now he has nothing left.

The Bible has a word for this kind of living. It’s called foolishness. The fool lives in the present with no regard for the future. The fool does what “feels right” *now*, and doesn’t consider the consequences of those choices *later*. Proverbs 22:3 puts it this way:

“The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.”

That’s what happens to the younger brother. He had lots of money, lots of fun, and he probably had lots of friends, but he didn’t stop and ask himself what he would do when all the money ran out. Or, perhaps he did. Maybe he saw the danger ahead and made a plan, not a wise one, but a foolish one. Perhaps he convinced himself that he could just keep on spending, because when he ran out of money, one of his friends would take him in. He takes care of them now, they’ll take care of him later, and everything will work out. But would it?

The answer is no. Verse 14 tells us that “a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.” Suddenly there’s a shortage of food in the land, so his friends can’t take care of him. They have to take care of themselves. Those who lived off his wealth for so long retreat to take care of their own, leaving the young man with nothing: no money, no friends, and no fun.

And so, he has no choice but to go and find whatever work he can. Verse 15 tells us that he was able to get a job feeding pigs. As a Jew, this would have been shameful, because pigs were unclean animals that made him ritually unclean as well, but he had no other choice. This was the only job he could secure, and though it kept him alive, it did so barely. Verse 16 tells us that the job paid him so poorly that he was “longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate.”

Jesus ends this part of the parable with this tragic line: “and no one gave him anything.” His fairweather friends were gone. He spent everything he had on them, and now they weren’t willing to spend anything on him. He wasn’t asking for much. All he wanted was some pig food, which was ten times better than whatever he was living on, but they wouldn’t even give him that.

Life had not turned out the way he planned it to, because he had been a fool. He didn’t see the danger and hide himself, but went on and suffered for it instead.

There are a lot of lessons here, a lot of warnings for prodigals or would-be-prodigals, but I’m only going to focus on one of them, and it is this: if you’re living as a prodigal, or if you’re tempted to live as a prodigal, remember that life rarely goes as planned.

You see, the problem with prodigals isn’t that they fail to plan. The problem with prodigals is that they think that their plans are all going to work out. Take professional athletes who go bankrupt as an example. Professional athletes earn more money playing in a handful of games than the average person who works for an entire lifetime, and yet some of them still end up dirt poor. Why? Because they were fools. They lived like prodigals, squandering their wealth in reckless living, thinking that there would always be another paycheque, another contract, and another season. But then an injury happens, or they get a step slower, or the game changes and there’s no longer room on the team for a player like him.

Fools take the future for granted. The wise don’t, because they know that things rarely happen as planned. The wise player lives as if each contract were their last. They see the danger of a career-ending injury and avoid it by carefully saving and investing instead of spending recklessly. That’s how the younger brother should have lived, but he didn’t. He may have seen the danger, but he didn’t hide himself, but went on and suffered for it.

So today, are you living like a prodigal? Have you chosen to spit in God’s face and live far from him in reckless living? You may have all sorts of plans for the future thinking that life’s going to work out this way or that way, so for now, you can just enjoy living “in the moment” doing whatever you want. Things may work out for you for a time, but they won’t work out forever, because the famine is coming, your friends are going to leave you, and before you know it, you’ll be eating with the pigs.

This parable is first and foremost a warning. It’s a warning to those who are living as prodigals now, and it’s a warning to those who want to live like prodigals in the future. Perhaps you’re waiting until you get to university, or you’ve moved out from your parents’ house, or you’ve secured that high-paying job, or you’ve finally reached retirement – whatever it may be, you’re waiting for the right moment to break free and live recklessly for yourself instead of God. Jesus is telling you in this parable that you’re not headed towards freedom. You’re headed towards the pig sty.

The sad reality, however, is that many choose to walk down the path of the prodigal son. That may be you right now, or that may be you in the future. If it is you, then Jesus wants the next part of the parable to be seared into your memory. When you’ve lost everything but the pigs you’ve been hired to feed, he wants you to remember what happens next.

Jesus tells us in verse 17 that the prodigal son “came to himself”. As he sat there in the pig sty of what had become his life, he finally had a moment of clarity. For a moment, he began to think straight, and in that moment he realized that, while he starved of hunger, his father’s servants had more than enough bread to eat every day. And so, he creates a plan, not a foolish one like the last, but a humble and wise one. He will arise and go to his father and say, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”

What we see here is a man who has been powerfully humbled. Where once he was brazen and selfish, now he is broken and remorseful. He’s been humbled by the foolishness of his decisions, and he’s been humbled by his sin. He knows he’s done wrong, both against God and against his father, and he’s willing to try to make things right.

This is in fact why he plans to hire himself out to his own father, to function no longer as a son, but as a hired servant. He wants to make restitution. He owes his father a debt, a very large debt, a debt the size of one-third of his father’s life savings. He may never pay it off, but he’s willing to try.

And now we reach the climax of the younger brother’s story. Verse 20 says that “he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

What is going on? The father ran and embraced him and kissed him? How can that be, after his son spat in his face? How can that be, after his son abandoned his family? How can that be, after his son squandered his life savings in reckless, selfish living?

Jesus’ answer is simple: it was love. It was love that gave the father eyes to see his son not with judgment but with compassion. It was love that compelled the father to run out to his lost son with his long robes tucked into his belt like a little child. It was love that wrapped the father’s arms around his lost son in a joyful embrace. And it was love that kissed his son’s filthy face.

This love was so exuberant, so overwhelming, and so overflowing that the son isn’t even able to finish his prepared speech before the father starts planning a party. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,” the young man begins to say. “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But before he can finish with “Treat me as one of your hired servants” like he planned, the father says to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate.

Just like that, in an instant, the prodigal son is restored. He’s welcomed back into the family, and he didn’t have to pay a penny to do so. He was willing to try, of course, but the father wouldn’t have it. Instead, the father drapes the best robe, his own personal coat, around his lost son, clothing him with the protection of the father’s own status and honour.

This is the God of the Bible. He has a Father’s heart. If you come to him in repentance and faith, he clothes you with his robes of righteousness so that you stand condemned no longer. It doesn’t matter how dirty you are, and it doesn’t matter how long you’ve been away. If you come to God acknowledging your sin against him and against those you have wronged, he will embrace you with the warmth of a father’s love and welcome you back into his family with joy.

(2) **THE OLDER BROTHER**

That’s how the story of the younger brother ends. It ends with forgiveness, reconciliation, and celebration. But now we transition to the older brother, who has a much different story, and a much deeper problem.

Jesus tells us in verse 25 that the “older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.”

The older brother refuses to join the party, however, because as verse 28 tells us, “he was angry and refused to go in.”

He was angry that his brother received grace. He was angry that his brother didn’t receive the punishment he deserved. He was angry that his prodigal brother was celebrated instead of himself, and it is this anger that leads to the dialogue that follows.

Jesus tells us that the father came out to the field and entreated him, pleading with him to come and join the party. But now, to his shame, it’s the older brother’s turn to spit in his father’s face.

He says “Look”, which is similar to how one might say say, “Look, *you*”. It’s impersonal and disrespectful, and the last way that a son should address his father.

“These many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command”. The word “served” here is the verb used to describe what slaves do for their masters. It’s like he’s saying, “I’ve *slaved away* for you”. The older brother may have done his work faithfully, he may have even done it with excellence, but he never did it joyfully. Every minute of every day, he resented the work that he did for his father, slaving away out of pure obligation rather than love.

And then he reveals the heart of his complaint. He says, “I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave *me* a young goat, that I might celebrate with *my* friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

He’s saying, “Look, you! I have been the perfect son. I have worked for you, I have obeyed you, and not once did I sin. If anyone deserves a celebration it’s *me*. I kept the rules. I did the work. I stayed at home. I did everything that was required of me, but you never held a party for me. You held it for this son of yours. He’s no brother of mine. He may be alive to you, but he’s still dead to me.”

With these words, Jesus has shown us the older brother’s true colours. *He was just like his younger brother*. He never loved his father. He loved his father’s *things*, and everything he did, he did to eventually secure those things for himself.

This is where Tim Keller is so insightful. He writes:

“The hearts of the two brothers were the same. Both sons resented their father’s authority and sought ways of getting out from under it. They each wanted to get into a position in which they could tell the father what to do. Each one, in other words, rebelled—but one did so by being very bad and the other by being extremely good. Both were alienated from the father’s heart; both were lost sons.” (*The Prodigal God*, p. 36).

Here’s the key to this parable: you can be just like the prodigal son without being prodigal at all. You can keep all the rules, you can have a spotless moral record, but be just as far from God as the son who ran away to a far country.

Indeed, Jesus seems to be saying that older brothers can be further from God than younger brothers by the way he ends the parable. The father makes one more plea to the older brother to come in and celebrate in verse 31: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

What happens to the older brother? Did he repent? Was he reconciled to his father like his younger brother? Or in his pride, did he remain angry and refuse to join the party? Jesus doesn’t tell us, and I believe it’s because he wants to show us that older brothers are in more danger than younger brothers. Their sin isn’t as blatant. It’s subtle. The younger brother sees the sickness of his heart reflected in the brokenness of his life, but the older brother doesn’t. All he sees is his own righteousness: his hard work, his obedience, and his moral superiority over others.

Are you an older brother? What’s the difference between someone who obeys God to get things, and someone who obeys God to get God? Our parable gives us a number of different symptoms of an older brother’s heart. Older brothers feel resentful at the grace that others receive. Older brothers have a high view of their own personal righteousness. Older brothers have a cordial but distant relationship with God. All of these signs are symptoms of an older brother’s heart.

But if I would try to summarize all these symptoms into one word, it would be this: entitlement.

Older brothers have a strong sense of entitlement when it comes to God. They believe that if they do certain things for God, then God *has* to do certain things for them. For the older brother, slaving away for years and obeying his father in everything made him believe that his father owed him. The reason why he listened to his father was so that his father would eventually have to listen to him.

If this is how you view your obedience, then you’re just like the older brother. You love the Father’s things more than the Father himself. You’re obeying to get, not obeying to love. Perhaps you obey because you want a spouse, or a career, or a high standard of living, or good health – whatever it may be, if you obey to get, then you’re just like the older brother.

And if you live like the older brother, then it’s only a matter of time before you become angry just like he did, because God isn’t going to give you what you think he must. You go to church so that God will prosper you, but your business fails or you get diagnosed with cancer. You read your Bible every day so that God will give you a spouse, but you remain single while your friends get married. If you obey to get, if you approach God with a sense of entitlement, believing that God owes you because you obeyed him, then you are just as far away from God as the older brother was to his father.

(3) **THE FAITHFUL BROTHER**

There’s one more brother in our text today that we must address before we close, leading to our third point: the Faithful Brother.

Like I mentioned earlier, this parable forms a unit with two other parables in Chapter 15: the parable of the lost sheep, and the parable of the lost coin. All three share the same basic elements: something precious is lost, the lost is found, and then there’s a big celebration. But as much as they are similar, there’s a key difference between the first two and the third that points us to Christ, and it’s this: someone went out to find what was lost in the first two parables, but no one went out in our parable today. The shepherd went out to find his lost sheep, and the woman went out to find her lost coin, but here, no one went out to find the lost son. Why? Because the one who should have went out was too busy slaving away selfishly for his father.

You see, the older brother should have pursued his younger brother. He should have followed this foolish young man to the far off country and rescued him from the pig sty he was in. He should have carried him back to his father and restored him into the family. But he didn’t. Instead, he stayed home, slaving away with gritted teeth and darkened eyes as he waited for his father to die.

Why does Jesus tell the parable this way? He does so in order to point us to himself. Tim Keller puts it this way:

“By putting a flawed elder brother in the story, Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn for a true one.”

That true elder brother is Jesus himself. Jesus is the faithful brother who followed sinners like us to a far off country when he came into our world as a man. Jesus is the faithful brother who rescued us from the pig sty of our sin when he died on the cross for our sins. Jesus is the faithful brother who reconciled us to the Father when he clothed us with the robes of his righteousness. And Jesus is the faithful brother who doesn’t hang back in anger, but comes into the Father’s house to celebrate, for we who were dead are alive again; we who were lost are now found.

**CONCLUSION**

So today, are you a prodigal son or daughter? Or if you’re not one right now, do you want to be? Do you want to live just like the rest of the world, doing whatever feels right without regard for God? Then hear Jesus’ loving warning to you today: you’re heading for disaster. The road of the prodigal son may seem good for a time, but it only ends in loss. Return to him. Come back to the Father.

It doesn’t matter if your motives aren’t pure. The prodigal son didn’t come to his senses because he was so convicted of his sin. He came to his senses because he was starving.

What are you starving for? Are you starving for genuine, loving friendships after you’ve been used by the world for so long? Are you starving for a sense of inner peace after living with anxiety and fear? Or are you starving to understand your place and purpose in the world? If you are, then let that hunger drive you to God. And if you do come to God, then you will find that he will not only satisfy your cravings, but give you the greatest gift of all: himself.

And to the older brothers here who struggle more with pride than prodigal living, you need to recognize that you’re in just as much danger as your prodigal brothers and sisters. You may be physically close to God because you come to church and do the right things, but you’re spiritually alienated from him. You’re more focused on getting things from God for yourself than getting God himself.

God is waiting for you with just as much love as he has for the returning prodigals. He wants you to know that he has always been with you, and that everything that he has belongs to you, because though you failed to be the older brother you should have been, Jesus has taken your place as *the* faithful brother. He has done what you could never do, so that you never have to be far from God. So come to him and celebrate, for prodigals and the proud alike were dead but are now alive; they were lost but are now found.