



Catalog No. 1954

Luke 15:25–32

54th Message

John Hanneman

March 23, 2014

THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR A "GOOD" SON

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

The movie "Legends of the Fall" is a story about a father and his three sons, living in the wilderness of Montana in the early 1900's. The youngest son dies early in the movie. The remaining two brothers live very different lives, one upright and good and the other wild and rebellious. They fall in love with the same woman and the older brother develops a deep resentment towards his younger brother. Towards the end of the movie the older brother expresses some honest and penetrating words: "I followed all of the rules, man's and God's. And you, you followed none of them. And they all loved you more. Samuel, Father, and my...even my own wife."

Those words could easily be in our text today. The question we want to ponder is this: Does following the rules, either God's rules or man's rules, insure us of receiving what our hearts most deeply desire, things like acceptance, approval, and love? What might be our motivation and expectation for being good? Does keeping the rules define our relationship with God? Is that the kind of relationship that God wants with us?

We turn our attention to the second half of the parable of the prodigal son, the story of the older brother in Luke 15. If you recall, the context for the story is the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes at Jesus receiving and eating with sinners and tax collectors. In response Jesus tells three parables about lostness. There is the lost sheep, the lost coin, and two lost sons.

We talked about the lost younger son last week. He asked his father for both his inheritance and the right to sell the property. The father suffered public humiliation and the pain of rejection but showed costly love by granting the request. He didn't try to tie his son down or force his obedience but rather gave him complete freedom.

The younger son went to a far country where he squandered his inheritance. When a famine occurred the son was in deep need and took a job working with pigs for a local citizen. The prodigal was starving and no one was giving him anything and so the son hatched a plan. He would return home and seek to be a hired servant like the ones his father hired.

The father saw his son as he approached the village. He ran to him, put his head on his son's neck, and kissed him. He gave him his best robe, a ring, and new shoes. The prodigal would not be a servant but a son. The father told his servants to kill the fattened calf and prepare a banquet. There was great joy because the son had been dead to his father but was now alive. The father found his son and the son accepted being found.

The older son was mentioned at the beginning of the parable, but was completely silent. Now he takes center stage. According to Ken Bailey, the structure of the second half of the parable is similar to the first half. However there are seven stanzas instead of eight. Jesus is asking the Pharisees and scribes to fill in the eighth stanza and finish the story. Like last week we will use Bailey's structure for our study.¹

Older Son Stands Aloof

Now his 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. (Luke 15:25–26 ESV)

When his younger brother arrived the older son was in the field. Ironically that was where the younger son was when he started his journey home. We read in verse 15: "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs" (Luke 15:15 ESV). Both sons start their journeys home from the same place.

The older son has been out of touch all day and completely unaware of what had transpired with his brother. As he nears the house, the air is charged with the sounds of a celebration. He hears music and dancing. The word "music" is the Greek word *symphonia*, from which we get our word symphony. In other words there is a band playing, not just a single instrument. The word "dancing" is the word *choros*, from which we get our word chorus and the first part of the word choreography.

Instead of entering the house, the older son calls to a young boy standing outside and asks him what is going on. This boy is not a slave or servant but one of the lads too young to go inside who are standing outside listening to the music.

Your Brother ... Sound ... Anger

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." But he was angry and refused to go in. (Luke 15:27–28)

Everyone in the village now knows the story of the younger son and the young boy knows all the details. He tells the older son that "your brother" has returned and that the celebration is a grand affair complete with a fattened calf. He then tells him the reason for the celebration—the father received his son back safe and sound. The verb "receive" is active, not passive, and has the sense that the father got his son back.

The phrase "safe and sound" is a single Greek word and refers to good physical health. However, it is hard to imagine that the prodigal is in tip-top shape since he was on the verge of starvation. The word for "safe and sound" is used in the Greek OT to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, which can refer to physical health but also to a sense of well-being and peace. While the prodigal might be physically fine it also implies that peace has been restored between the young son and his father. They have been reconciled.

At hearing this report, the older son's blood begins to boil and he chooses to not enter the house. He is upset because the father has so readily reconciled with his brother. He is upset at the unfairness and injustice of his father's lavish grace and acceptance. He also is fearful

as to what this will mean for his share of the inheritance. Ironically, the son that was on the outside is now inside and the one who was inside is now outside.

The older son's actions are a public insult of the father and demonstrates a complete lack of respect. Everyone becomes aware of what is happening with the brother's refusal to enter and everything grinds to a halt. The band stops playing, the dancers stop dancing, and all eyes turn to the father to see what he will do.

Costly Love

His father came out and entreated him. (Luke 15:28)

For the second time in a day the father demonstrates unexpected and costly love. Instead of being angry at his son's rudeness and refusal to rejoice with him he comes out and entreats him. The verb "entreat" means "to come along side" and indicates a repeated attempt to persuade his son to join the party. The father came to his younger son at the edge of the village and now he comes to his older son at the edge of the house. He treats the older son with the same tenderness as his younger son and wants to reconcile him as well. The father initiates with both sons.

Older Son's Actions and Cost

But he answered his father, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends." (Luke 15:29)

Like in the story of the younger son, the older son speaks in the center of the story. The first part of his speech reveals his attitude towards his father. He doesn't address his father properly and quarrels with him in public, another sign of disrespect. He says that he has served or "slaved" for his father for many years. His relationship with his father is one of a slave and not a son. In reality he is working for himself since the father has already divided the property. He says that he has never disobeyed a commandment, i.e. that he is perfect. But his actions are clearly disobedient. He complains that the father has never given him a young goat so that he could celebrate with his friends. A goat is an animal of little value compared to a fattened calf. It is like comparing a big mac to a four-course dinner. And obviously his friends are separate from the family because if they were present he could celebrate with them that night. Basically the "good" son desires in his heart to do what the wayward son did.

Younger Son's Actions and Cost

"But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:30)

In the second half of his speech, the older son reveals his attitude towards his brother. He calls the brother "this son of yours." His disgust for his brother makes saying his name so unpleasant he can't say the word "brother." He claims that the brother has devoured his father's property or literally, "life." If the older brother was so concerned with his father's life then why did he not protest the dividing of the inheritance in the first place? The older son claims that his brother squandered his money on prostitutes. But he would have no knowledge of that. He didn't even know his brother was home.

Basically the older son wants to shut down the party and have his brother punished. He is jealous and resentful of the father's lavish

grace. He claims that his brother has broken all the rules and yet his father loves him more. The older brother is a picture of the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling at Jesus receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners. The father has every right to give his son a licking but that is not what happens.

Father's Love

And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." (Luke 15:31)

What an amazing response. Instead of responding in anger and defensiveness the father simply asserts his love and commitment. The word "son" literally means "my child" or "my boy," a term of affection. He reminds him that he had always provided for him and that has never been interrupted. He also assures him that nothing will happen to his inheritance now that his brother is back. He doesn't need to fear because everything is his. The double use of "always" and "all" contrasts the older son's double use of "never" in v. 29, meaning that nothing has changed or diminished. The father doesn't want his son to be a slave. He wants him to be a son, the same thing he wanted for his brother. The father continues:

Your Brother ... Found ... Joy

"It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." (Luke 15:32)

The father basically repeats what he said in verse 24 when he found his younger son: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to celebrate" (Luke 15:24). In all three parables of Luke 15 there is joy and celebration at finding what was lost.

The prodigal is not only a son, but he is "your brother." The father tells the older son that it was fitting or "necessary" to celebrate and to be joyful because there was a resurrection. The word "it was necessary" is a favorite term for Luke. He uses it 18 times in Luke and 22 times in Acts. Jesus will say later that it was necessary for him to suffer and die. Here it was necessary to have joy. The father is not defending himself but saying that joy is the natural way to respond. The verb "found" is passive meaning that the father did the finding and is therefore the reason for the celebration. In the lost sheep parable Jesus said, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

The Older Son's Response

The story ends abruptly without knowing how the older son will respond. Jesus is asking his audience, the Pharisees and scribes, to fill in the ending. They are like the older son, angry with Jesus for receiving outcasts. They are so angry they could kill him. They are the ninety-nine who need no repentance. Jesus is inviting them to join the party. How will they respond? Ken Bailey fills in the ending that Jesus would love to see:

And the older son embraced his father, and entered the house, and was reconciled to his brother and to his father. And the father celebrated together with his two sons. All of us get lost in one way or another. Some of us get lost outside of the house like the prodigal. But some of us get lost inside the house like the older son. It might be easier to recognize being lost when we are prodigals, when we are involved in reckless living and addiction. But

either outside or inside, externally or internally, we can be equally rebellious and lost in our relationship to Jesus.²

Living as either son results in slavery. The younger son was a slave to sin. The older son was a slave to the law. Living under the law, being good, and keeping all the rules does not give us freedom, joy, and peace. Living under the law is a religion of self-effort, performance, and sin management. The manifestation of living under law is anger, resentment, and jealousy. We are constantly looking at the face of another to see how we feel about ourselves. Living under the law results in an “us” versus “them” mentality, a community of insiders who exclude outsiders and outcasts.

This is what Paul is trying to explain in Galatians 4:1-7, our scripture reading this morning. You can be in the house and be the heir to everything. But if you are living under the law you are slave, no different from someone who is a slave of sin. God doesn't want us to be slaves but rather sons and daughters.

Paul says, “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Galatians 3:26). “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (Galatians 4:6-7). Being a son or a daughter is a gift received not earned by being good and keeping the rules.

I can relate to both sons, but perhaps more to the older son. I grew up keeping the rules, being good, going to church, getting all A's, and a college scholarship. My identity was based on performance. Even though I became the prodigal when I was in college, after the father found me in my early 20s I reverted to my default way of living. I began to live the Christian life by managing sin and finding approval from others through outer behavior. I might have looked pretty good on the outside, but I was still lost on the inside. When I became a pastor at age 33 I doubled my efforts to prove myself and earn love and approval. Even though I would not have verbalized it at the time my basic philosophy was that “I can do it,” ingrained in me through my Midwest, German background. If I can do all the right things then everything will fall into place. If I keep all God's rules then I will experience his love and have freedom, peace, and joy.

In 1992, when I was 42, things started falling apart. My dad had died and my mother was dying with cancer. My oldest daughter was a teenager and beginning to rebel. I couldn't manage or control everything through performance and hard work. I was angry and resentful. That summer I went to Regent College and took a class on Galatians by Gordon Fee. When we got to chapter three I was blindsided by verse 26: “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Galatians 3:25-26). For the first time I was honest and said, “I am not a son. That doesn't define my relationship with God.” I was a slave—a slave to self-effort, a slave of performance, a slave of earning love and acceptance through my efforts both from God and people.

I knew that it no longer mattered whether I sinned or not. I knew there was something so much deeper. I knew that if I didn't get this right nothing else mattered. My mom died and the house I grew up in sold. I realized that my physical home would never be the home I wanted and that I would never have the relationship with my parents that I longed for. That began a three-year process being immersed in this parable, the parable of the two lost sons, asking God if I could be a son. Finally, somewhere in that three years I was sitting at home and I heard God's voice: “You are my beloved son. In

you I am well pleased.” At that instant I knew I was a son and I was home. God found me and I accepted being found. After that all my relationships changed—with God and people. Amazing how long it takes for truth to descend from the mind to the heart.

There are probably more older sons here than younger sons, especially you high school students. You are in the house, growing up in the church. You are keeping the rules and being good. But just being good is not what a relationship with God is all about. I am not telling you to be bad and disobey all the rules. At your age you need some amount of law and structure. Boundaries are for your protection because boundary-less adolescence is not good. And I'm not telling you that working hard and getting good grades is bad. Just be aware of your priorities, your identity, and work to have some balance in your life.

What I am telling you is, don't settle for being a good Christian and doing what Christians do. Being a Christian is not about being perfect. The college basketball tournament that is labeled March Madness started this weekend. Do you know that eleven million people filled out March Madness brackets on ESPN and all eleven million people have failed already, the first weekend? No one is perfect and no one has ever been perfect in selecting the winner in all the games. Likewise none of us are going to be perfect with the exception of Jesus. God does not expect us to be perfect. God wants so much more for us. He wants us to be his sons and daughters. God's ability to find is much greater than our failures. We can never out-fail the love of God. His love is never a function of our performance.

In each of the three parables there is joy, rejoicing, and celebration and in the last parable Jesus mentions the fattened calf three times. Remember the messianic banquet that we talked about in chapter 14? Well, the messianic banquet has begun. The party has started. Jesus is inviting outcasts and incasts, law-breakers and law-keepers. He wants us to join the party and the celebration. He also wants us to bring lost sheep and lost sons to the party so that they can be found. He wants each of us to receive our inheritance of being his sons and daughters.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

1. Kenneth Bailey, *Finding the Lost* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 164.

2. Ibid.

