



## FOR LOVE OF THE FATHER

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Luke 15:11-32

David Bruce

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What is your burden for Cupertino? Would you die for the people who drive their cars along these streets? What is your burden? What drives you to extremes? Or perhaps I can ask another question: Why has God put this church on this street today?

J.B. Phillips said this: "The gospel is nothing but a frozen asset unless it is communicated." And he was right, of course. How was it in the Church of Acts? Roy Joslin writes: "Evangelism for the early Christians was not something they isolated from other aspects of Christian living in order to specialize, analyze, theorize and organize. They just did it!"

So why should we invest prayer, time, money, and effort from the limited resources available within our fellowships in reaching our communities? The most obvious answer to give to this question is put forward by John Stott when he says: "In the last resort we engage in evangelism today, not because we want to or because we choose to or because we like to, but because we have been told to."

Now this is undoubtedly true. God has always been a God who tells his people to "Go." To Abraham, a man well on in years and settled in the domesticity of a prosperous life, God said, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." Moses was compelled by God, despite his diffidence and human inadequacy to obey a simple and similar command: "So now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

In Isaiah 6 God places a challenge before his awe-struck servant: "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" To the reluctant and parochially minded prophet Jonah, God says bluntly; "Go to that great city of Nineveh and preach against it for its wickedness has come up before me." And then Jesus comes as the fulfillment of all these and many more "goings." His words are startlingly familiar to us but no less dangerous for all that: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Now for many of us this is going to be sufficient answer to the question, "Why share our faith?" It is because we have been told to, and the One who has told us has it in his heart that we should do this for him. But we need to go further.

What lay behind the early Christians' astonishing commitment to evangelism? Theirs was a commitment which got them into constant trouble, which led to their imprisonment and martyrdom, which caused their rejection by the religious authorities of Judaism, which branded them a sect and a menace. But it was a commitment which changed the complexion of the Roman Empire and ultimately altered forever the way humanity occupies the planet. I hope like me, you want to know about a force like that.

Not surprisingly, the first and most important impetus behind the evangelism of the early Church was the discovery that God loved them, and this supremely and sublimely in Jesus. As John writes: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins...dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...no-one has ever seen God, but if we love each other...we testify that the Father has sent his son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:10).

They had been stopped in their tracks by the love of Jesus. Their response was to love each other in the same way: to model Christ before the world to testify to what God had done for them. This is a basic principle of Christian living. God has loved us; we should similarly love each other.

So how has God loved us? Perhaps the best illustration of the love of God for sinful men and women is the teaching of Jesus in Luke 15, what we have come to call the parable of the prodigal son. This is a familiar if sometimes misunderstood parable. Even calling it the parable of the prodigal son places the emphasis on the wrong part of the story. If anyone is the hero, it is the forgiving father. And it is not simply the younger (prodigal) son who is being addressed in the parable, but both sons who show a desperate spiritual need within them.

Luke 15:11-12:

**"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them." (NIV)**

Let's look at this from a different angle than usual. Jesus has an audience as he is telling this story, and they are a very mixed crowd indeed, as we see from the

opening verses of the chapter:

**Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (15:1-2)**

They are probably all Jewish, but they come from every social strata and every level of religious commitment. The tax collectors and sinners are delighted that this Rabbi is not ashamed to eat with them at table, while the Pharisees and law teachers complain bitterly about this breach of protocol. The sympathies of the audience are divided. They would all know that it was the custom for children to wait until their parents were dead before even discussing matters to do with inheritance, and yet here was a younger son barging in where he did not belong, demanding his share, now. The over forties in the crowd would have shaken their heads in disapproval, and then nodded sagely among themselves about the declining standards with the younger generation.

Verse 13:

**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.**

Once again you can probably imagine the reaction of the crowd to this. The Pharisees and legalists among them would pull themselves up and furrow their brows. They would tut tut, and then look meaningfully (if sideways) at the tax collectors and sinners on either side of them, as if to say, “Now you listen to this, you degenerate rabble. This is about you. You are going to learn something here.”

Verses 14-15:

**After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.**

Horses, cows, even sheep wouldn’t have been so bad. But pigs? The Pharisees and legal people would have been incensed by this as they consider the good kosher home from which the lad had emerged, and how he had deliberately and flagrantly disobeyed the customs and laws of his people to end in this despicable, filthy state, working with animals so unclean that any good Jewish boy would pass on the other side of the road to avoid contact with them. I suppose Jesus can see the disapproval and disgust on the faces of his rather self-righteous audience at this picture, so he deliberately makes it even worse, and puts them off their dinner altogether:

**He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the**

**pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything.**

Of course you can see what Jesus was doing. He was placing their sympathies. By now, the younger son in the story had become an object of contempt to the Pharisees, so skillfully had Jesus painted this word-picture of a thoroughly reprobate, irresponsible and self-condemned young man. But they would know that Jesus hadn’t finished, that if he was worth his salt as a Rabbi the denouement was coming—a showdown between the father and the younger son. This was what they were looking forward to. If this father was doing his job at all, he would have his son beaten and severely disciplined by the religious authorities of the district. Then the people would see the consequences of flouting the law of God.

We know, of course, what the father did, and that he is a picture to us of God the Father in his response to a returning sinner. Far from trying to forget the existence of this wayward son, as the Pharisees would have suggested he do, the father has been watching for him on the road, hoping, always hoping for his return. Far from greeting him with conditional reserve, disgusted at the smell and the state of his clothes as the Pharisees would have done, he throws his arms around him and kisses him, mingling the pristine clean of his garments with the filth of his son’s rags. Far from treating his repentant story with skepticism and contempt as the Pharisees would have done, he honors him with a robe, a ring and sandals—all the visible signs of sonship which he wished now publicly to affirm before his household and the community. Far from saying, “I told you so,” he says by these actions, “I love you so.”

It is a picture for us of a Father-God who loves with such passion that he strains the very boundaries of heaven itself, reaching out his arms towards us, willing us back to him. It is such love that the very courts of celestial perfection cannot contain, as Jesus careers headlong into the dust and grime of the human condition. It is love like this which ushered Jesus on his earthly ministry, and it is love like this which lies at the heart of our evangelistic concern for other people. Knowing that this is how God feels about us, knowing that he has been scanning the horizon for us, knowing that he has never been at rest while we have been away from him, knowing that he would give anything (and has), to have us back, knowing this, we reach out in his name to other prodigals with the Good News. What is your burden for Cupertino?

The very act of repentance caused such joy to well up in the heart of the father that he threw a party. But his older son was so angry that he refused to go. Here is the sting in the tail for those self-righteous Pharisees who discover to their discomfort that the story hasn’t worked out just as they imagined. There are two sons here, two different kinds of hard heart. The first is the flagrantly immoral sinner who lives life with a reckless

disregard for everyone but himself. He discovers very quickly and in dramatic style that he needs his father. We need to befriend people like this. Our church structures need to be sufficiently flexible to reach down and out. The second is the self-satisfied, self-righteous religious type who tries to live morally and well, and imagines that God will be lenient with him because basically he is good. We need to befriend people like this. Our church structures need to be sufficiently flexible to reach up and out, else we have failed to communicate the astonishing love of God for the unlovely.

Notice what the father did with the older son. Verse 28:

**The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.**

He pleaded with him. Do you see the vulnerability in that statement? But love is like that; it is risky, since it may always be rejected. The father made himself vulnerable to his proud, stubborn older son. Did he deserve such a thing? “Not at all!” we protest within us. But this is their way of love, not the way of men. He tried to illustrate to him the intense joy he felt at the return of his younger son.

But so self-righteous is this older son that he cannot even acknowledge the close family connection with his brother. Verse 30:

**“When this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.”**

He lays the blame for his selfish misery at his father’s door: “This son of yours—no brother of mine, thank you very much.” And who mentioned prostitutes? It’s not in the text earlier on. Now perhaps the younger son was into that kind of thing, perhaps not, but the point is that the older brother thought the worst and deliberately articulated it where it would cause most pain—before his father. Families are good at inflicting pain on each other because they know how to stimulate maximum hurt for minimum effort. Let us beware of the power we wield to hurt and mutilate the tender spirit of our families.

What is Jesus doing with this story? He is teaching of the mercy and love of a Father-God for whom failure is never final. Is this for you today? Praise God. He is teaching of a grace which is poured out with such astonishing generosity that would cause him to sweat drops of blood so harsh was the cost. The invitation to prodigals like you and me to return was not cheaply given. It all but fractured the Godhead. But still it was given. He is teaching of love as a father’s motivation and of forgiveness as a father’s heart’s desire. Is this for you today? Praise God. But he is teaching hard truth to his own people the Jews, and more specifically to the Pharisees and law professors who were listening to him

speaking. The older son who stands for the Pharisees in the story had all the advantages of a potentially wonderful relationship with his father, but he was too selfish to enjoy it. However, this story was not told out of spite against them, it was told out of a passion to win them: that Jesus’ own people humble themselves and pray and seek his face and turn from their wicked ways. It was Jesus’ burden for his own that drove him, and their stubborn refusal to accept him that drove him to tears. What is your burden for Cupertino?

A little later Paul works this burden out in his own Christian experience. He teaches the Christians in Rome that no circumstances can ever remove them from the tender encirclement of God’s love and care. Romans 8:38-39:

**For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

That’s quite wonderful. But then he continues with an astounding and personal outburst of grief at the unwillingness of his own people the Jews to accept the truth about Jesus. It is precisely the same burden that Jesus himself articulated in this parable. What does the apostle say? Rom.9:1-4a:

**I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.**

Paul says that he is willing to be cut off from Christ if that would benefit his Hebrew brethren and bring them to faith. Now I have to ask myself a question in face of this burden. Would I be willing to be cut off from Christ for the sake of my fellow countrymen? Well, as we think of this, of course it is inconceivable, isn’t it? After all, Paul has just told us in the verses preceding this that it cannot happen: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

But we must press the point even so. Even though it could not happen, would we be willing for such a fate in order to rescue others? Would we be willing to substitute all the blessings of heaven for all the curses of hell if others could be brought to salvation through it? Now of course you will see what Paul was trying to say. Christ himself must tutor us here. That he who was by nature immortal and inseparable from the Father, became for our sakes both mortal and separate. In the same way, Paul imitated his Master, and was willing to become a prodigal from Christ for the sake of his fellow prodigals, just as Christ was willing to become our

prodigal from his Father for the sake of us all. Now we may say that this is an astonishing burden for others that Paul bears if he can say this with integrity. But is it so astonishing, that if the Lord of glory, invested with all the splendor and majesty of heaven's Deity, was made a curse for slaves, is it astonishing that the slave should be willing to be a curse for his brethren? This is incarnation. And while it may never happen that we are to be cut off from Christ, may we not say in the words of Philippians 2 that we are to empty ourselves/make ourselves nothing as he did? Is this where we are? Is this your burden for Cupertino? Or is our burden for others cool and conditional? Would we be willing to give of ourselves for our neighbors in our road or street? Or are there too many other concerns preventing us? Paul was willing to set aside his place in heaven for people he didn't even know, so concerned was he for their eternal destiny. Many of us are not willing to set aside even a night's television for people we love, so unconcerned are we for their eternal destiny.

The bottom line is that Paul, following the example of Jesus, made himself a slave. This is the one common denominator in the attitudes of great men and women of God through the ages. Diverse though they have been in temperament, gifts, ministry and outlook, they have all been slaves—slaves to Christ, obviously, but slaves to each other. A slave is someone who belongs totally to another. As Paul writes to the Corinthians: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and our-

selves as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4:5).

Paul places himself in the position of slave to the Corinthian Church. What was the Corinthian Church like? Was it nice? Not at all. It was awful. They had law disputes and alcoholism. They had squabbles between different doctrinal factions. They had all the detritus of Greek decadence washed up amongst them: former prostitutes, both male and female, not to mention homosexuals and people caught up in shady financial dealings. It should have been called 1st Prodigal Church Corinth. Paul wasn't like that. He might have thought of himself with some justification perhaps as a cut above them. He had impeccable credentials, a good university education, and the respect of thousands throughout the known world. But he saw himself as, what? Their teacher? Their lord? Their master? Their elder? No, as their slave, totally belonging to them, such was his burden.

There is in the final analysis only one way that could happen. Had Paul not first become the helpless slave of Christ, he could not become a slave to these damaged, broken people. Had Paul not first witnessed the astonishing burden of God the Father for the Prodigal, he could not begin to be burdened for others. What is your burden? What is your burden for Cupertino?

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