

## Our Recklessly Extravagant God: *Imploring a Self-Righteous Son* Luke 15:25-32

**Introduction:** We love to hear testimonies of what God has done. In fact, a testimony of how God has changed lives is perhaps the most powerful tool that we have in our disposal to communicate the truth of the gospel, outside of the direct use of Scripture. Growing up in a church, the ones that seemed to be the most impactful, those that drew the quickest response and most emotion were those that included much of the life of the younger brother: outright rebellion, drug or another addiction, living on the street, loss of job, home, relationship, shaking a fist at God, parents, and church, and some amount of hitting “rock bottom”. These are the stories that play. These are the stories that you’d have in an outreach event or tell at men’s retreat and there would be a palpable response.

But is the story of the younger brother the greatest miracle, or the greatest expression of grace by God in salvation? As we saw last week, it is a mighty display of God’s love and mercy to save a rebellious sinner like us, but perhaps a greater miracle is when a **self-righteous sinner** is saved. That is what God saved me from. You see I grew up with a high view of God and morality, and trusted in my ability to obey, my reputation, and my knowledge base as the means of salvation. I would not have SAID that, but that is what I believed. No major overt sin, just piles of hidden pride, delight in my own goodness, and desperation to keep everyone believing how good I was. I wanted glory for myself instead of yielding it to God alone. This not only made for a boring testimony at youth functions (“I grew up in a Christian home, go to a Christian school, and never did drugs”), but showed that I was light years away from God when I read the Bible everyday. God saving someone as self-righteous as me is a greater miracle, its just not as splashy. In fact, there are NO RECORDED STORIES in the gospel accounts of a Pharisee or scribe becoming a true follower of Jesus. There are only 2 that we have in the NT: Nicodemus, who by church historical accounts came to become a follower, and the book of Acts tells us of Paul’s conversion. The rarity of such things not only creates a greater story, but also causes us to pause at the reality that most of us here grew up as moral rebels, not overt ones.

This parable is much different than we think. We left last week testifying to God’s grace in covering our sin AND shame by taking all of it on Himself in Jesus Christ. The ending of this story should have been an eyes watering and nose running uncontrolled joyful sob. It should have caused the crowd to instantly emote, like the first time you saw Beaches or the first part of the movie “UP”, or whenever I watch the end of “The Natural”. But that is not the ending of this story. This parable is not mere sentimentality, it is a **drastic, radical call to deny self, pick up ones cross, and follow Jesus**. The target was not “wayward” sinners but religious people who DO all that the law requires, the moral insiders, who fancied themselves as the inner circle of the Kingdom yet were as rebellious as the younger brothers.

This parable was not warm but was aimed to warn. The self-centeredness of the younger brother was worn on his sleeve while the self-righteousness of the older was worn under his clothes. The younger brother believed that the path to happiness was through **self-discovery**, while the older brother walked by **moral conformity**. The younger brother wanted to be out from his father’s authority and free from any responsibility, while the older brother wanted to gain authority over his father through his own strength of being responsible.

Both wanted to Father’s goods, but neither truly wanted, nor loved, the Father.

So this morning we turn to look at the older brother, and in turn look at ourselves. Jesus drew the Pharisee’s and scribes to a response out of love and grace. The question for us: how do we see

ourselves before God? Broken, unworthy, and needing of salvation and restoration, or worthy, strong, and capable of pleasing God on our own. How we answer this question will reveal if we have truly repented and have tasted of the Father's grace and love.

### **A Self-Righteous Reaction to Grace (25-30)**

**Luke 15:25-30**"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> 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.' <sup>28</sup> But he was **angry** and **refused** to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> 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**. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

### **Unwelcome News (25-27)**

We concluded the first stanza of the story with a celebration on a scale that had never been seen on the estate. This party would have lasted for days, and included the best clothes being worn and the fattened calf being roasted in portions and eaten over various meals. There would have been music, dancing, eating, drinking, and making the heart merry. Combine the celebratory atmosphere of a birth, marriage, and finding a lost child together and you get the gist of level of enjoyment. The town would have been invited along with the workers, family members, and whoever else was around. This was the party of the ages. The joy was not directed at the son, but on the father, who restored the honor of the son by taking his shame. This made the Father seem even more magnanimous than before.

But not everyone shared the sentiment. Jesus began the second stanza of His parable with the older sons story. We find him "in the field", most likely overseeing the family operation, which meant he was not getting his hands dirty but managing those who did. It shows that the Fathers estate was large, so large that it took a while for the son to realize what was going on back at the house. As he got closer he called one of the servants, perhaps one of those on the fringe of the party scene, what was going on. He was filled with utter contempt with the response: ***your brothers home "safe and sound", and your Father has put on a party for him!*** There are a few things that would have set the brother off at this point.

First, the term here for "safe and sound" meant he was received back in good health, but the word was also used in the Septuagint to refer to "peace", "shalom", meaning that this punk, foolish, immature brother of his had been welcomed back in peace without having to make restitution. Was his father nuts? Are you going to continue to reward his incompetence, to validate his entitlement? Second, the brother would have expected to be involved in the planning of this party, since it was HIS PORTION OF THE INHERITANCE THAT WAS BEING USED! You could only imagine the look on his face as he beheld this festival before him, seeing his brother in what should have been HIS robe, dancing around like NOTHING happened! It is not a big leap to anticipate what happened next.

### **An Angry Revelation**

What was revealed in the brother was a brewing anger that had bubbled under the surface and now found an outlet. He seethed. This was not anger that is seen when getting cut off in traffic. This was molten lava flow that was suppressed for years and could be contained no more. He refused to join the party, refused to recognize his brother, and refused to follow his father. Where did this pent up anger come from? The text gives us clues.

- 1) **He had no love or respect for His father** – Notice that after the entreaty of his father, his response was terse: “Look, these years...” There was no reference to “Father”, which even the younger brother prefaced his request with. It was equivalent to saying, “Look, old man, all these years...” The older brother viewed the Father as a roadblock to his plans, and now the father changed the paradigm on him, which left the brother with nothing but anger
- 2) **He viewed his service to the father as slavery** – The word the brother uses here, *doulos*, was used for slave language. He spent the years slaving away NOT out of a love for the Father, but what he perceived would be the payoff in the end. Now that end goal was slipping away and the true motive for his labor was revealed. His work was self-centered, and even what seemed to be helpful and sacrificial was actually a means of control to get what he wanted. We do this when we make deals with God: Give me \_\_\_\_\_ and I will commit \_\_\_\_\_.

*“Elder brothers may do good to others, but not out of delight in the deeds themselves or for the love of people or the pleasure of God. They are not really feeding the hungry or clothing the poor, they are feeding and clothing themselves. The heart’s fundamental self-centeredness is not only kept intact but nurtured by fear based moralism. This can and does erupt in shocking ways.”*

- 3) **He believed he had earned a reward, or at least acknowledgement** – Notice what he thought about himself as opposed to how his brother saw himself. *“I never disobeyed your command”*. To the letter, I have done everything that you’ve asked of me, and this is the *thanks* I get! This sounds strangely like the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18ff; Mark 10:17ff), who came to Jesus claiming and believing that he’d kept all the commandments from his youth. There are two glaring, fundamental problems: 1) The law was not delivered to save, but to show ones need for salvation apart from the law 2) No one could keep the law perfectly and everyone has broken it. Notice as well the brother thought **HE** deserved the party, but it was not to celebrate with the Father, but with his friends. The reward was not God for this brother, but what he could get from God. This is equivalent to **therapeutic moralistic deism** today, where we believe God is there to make us happy, to give to us, to be at our beck and call, not to submit to, know, and love, the way He wants.
- 4) **He believed he was fundamentally better than his brother...and father** – Notice the comparison game he plays – “when this son of yours comes”, distancing himself from his brother, not claiming relationship but attaching blame for the son onto the father. This son of yours wasted his inheritance on *prostitutes* and you reward him! At this point the older son was claiming that his father was more shameful than the brother, and the expectation was that dad would repent of his foolish, shameful, and misguided ways. The older son showed that he believed he not only knew what was best for his own life (like the younger brother), but knew best for all of life. The father was not just in the way at this point, he was THE PROBLEM in life.

### A Passionate Appeal

Now before we look at the marks of self-righteousness and the end of the story, we need to go back to verse 28. Notice that as the brother seethed in his anger, refusing to join, the father did not write him off, but came out and **entreated him**. That word, *parakaleo*, is in a tense that means he came out continually beseeching, comforting, and encouraging him to come in. The Father urged the son, not just once, to know that he was welcomed and desired. You see, both sons had no love or respect for the Father, but that was not the basis of the father’s love for them. God appeals to the lost through His chosen (**2 Cor. 5:20** - Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, **God making his appeal through us**. We

<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*, p. 62.

implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.) Even as he waited for the lost and rebellious son to return, His gracious patience is seen with the older brother.

### *How do we know if we are self-righteous? What are the warning signs?*

- **We are continually waiting for someone else to repent, but we ourselves never do** –The source of the problems in our life and the world are outside of us, but we never take ANY responsibility for our own sin, nor are we aware of how sinful we truly are
- **We are suspicious of joyful people** – Being driven by external morality cannot bring joy, and fear based compliance means we simply cannot trust that someone could be so free when they have not done or earned the right to be so. Since self-righteous people have never tasted joy, they cannot comprehend it in others.
- **We have no concept of grace** – We understand justice, but cannot comprehend mercy. Someone must earn the right to be where they are, must work off what they have done, must feel the weight of their sin, and even though they may have repented, we are still not sure its genuine, because we cannot comprehend it in our own lives.
- **Anger and bitterness are calling cards** - Unmet expectations cause you to be upset with others, but especially with God. The expectation is that because of earned goodness, God is in their debt and they are owed good things. When circumstances turn, we question God because we believe our life = what we want. Anger also leads to fearful insecurity, so that we cannot enjoy when others are joyful or succeed.
- **Sins are put in categories, with ours more sanitized than others** - Competitive comparison is the main way the self-righteous achieve a sense of their own significance. They believe they have sinned, but those are sins that are easily explained and justified. Others have sinned much worse, in greater degree, or in ways we never would. This gives a sense of superiority, a separation from "bad" sinners, making the self-righteous "good", morally superior, and better.

*"I want to hate my sins more than I hate the sins of others who sin differently than I do."* Burk Parsons

- **We cannot forgive others, truly** - It is impossible to forgive someone if you feel superior to them. This leads to consistent and a pervasive judgmental attitude toward OTHERS sin. Forgiveness finds its payment and satisfaction on the cross, with Jesus paying in full the wrath due our sin, meaning that any "pound of flesh" we would want was nailed to Him. Lack of forgiveness of others means we have never tasted forgiveness ourselves, because it means that God remembers our sin no more, and that means we remember others no more against us. Self-righteous brothers live in misery because they can never believe that a sinner could truly be washed clean since sin had made them so dirty.
- **Our prayers are limited to requests and asking God for things** - The self-righteous will pray, but the prayers are not to KNOW, LOVE, and DELIGHT in God, but to continually ask for things, of which we do not receive (James 4:3). God is a cosmic butler and divine Genie to get us what we want, a dispenser of material blessing that is not worthy of knowing. These can be summed up in what **Tim Keller** summarized:

*"Elder brothers have an undercurrent of anger towards life circumstances, hold grudges long and bitterly, look down at people of other races, religions, and lifestyles, experience life as a joyless, crushing drudgery, have little intimacy and joy in their prayer lives, and have deep insecurity that makes them*

*overly sensitive to criticism and rejection yet fierce and merciless in condemning other. What a terrible picture! And yet the rebellious path of the younger brother is obviously not a better alternative.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **A Gracious Response to Self Righteousness (31-32)**

**Luke 15:31-32** And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.<sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

#### **A Perspective on Reality**

After the sons ranting, the Father speaks truth into the situation and his life. The reality was that the son had LOST nothing by the brother returning. He still was promised all that the Father owned that would be his when the Father died. The fact that the younger brother came back did not diminish any aspect of the inheritance, and in fact would have heightened it. In the context, this meant that the Pharisees lost nothing by having other sinners join the kingdom, and did not lose anything even when Gentiles were added. The reality of what the Father offered was not **material possession**, although that was vast, **but He was offering Himself. He is the possession, He is the treasure, He is the inheritance.** This was completely missed by the Pharisees.

#### **The Source of Celebration**

The Father reminded the son of the reason for the celebration. One who was lost and dead, who had already been committed to the grave at a family funeral service, was found and made alive. This was a party celebrating the Father! This is what brings God joy when His redemptive purposes in Christ are unleashed on the lost and broken. Heaven is not focused on the sinner, but on the God who saves. This is what the self-righteous brother missed. They missed that all of life is about the glory of God, not our own. Missing this fact means they not only miss out on salvation, but on joy, forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

### **A Gracious Open-ended Request to the Self-Righteous**

#### **An Abrupt Ending**

Now here is where there is an unusual abrupt ending to the story. Jesus was the master story teller, and this is a masterpiece. Each follows what is called a *chiastic structure* (ABCD-DCBA - for you literature geeks...I mean scholars). The first line of an 8 line stanza corresponds with the last, and each successive line down does the same - i.e - The first line of the younger brother we see a death, and in the last line we see a resurrection. That is neat in itself, but here is where it gets good. The second stanza follows the same pattern, **EXCEPT** the last line is missing (it contains only 7). The first line is that a brother stands aloof, but there is no ending to the story. There is **NO RESOLUTION** to the story. We are left, along with the original audience to wonder what the response of the older brother is. Jesus put the ball back in the Pharisees court. He left the ending off graciously to give them an opportunity to repent, just like the younger brother.

#### ***What would repentance look like?***

If we could write the end, what would it look like? What would we hope his response be? We would hope it would look like the younger brother. It would start with a proper assessment of ones spiritual condition, seeing oneself in light of God's holiness. The would leave him wanting, realizing that he is heading toward death and disaster without a change. Then there would be a turn of humility, that

<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*, p. 70-71

moved away from the direction he was going and turned back to the father. He would have laid Himself at the Father's feet, appealing to His mercy alone, seeking to be restored, desiring a relationship with Him because of His great love. He would ask for forgiveness not based on his merit, but on the Father's grace. He would confess his hypocrisy, his life of manipulation, and his self-righteousness. This is what repentance looks like. This would change everything in the life of the brother. This would make his obedience a means of pleasing God, not a means of acceptance. He would feel the fresh freedom of grace, the grace of forgiveness, and the joy of pursuing God as the greatest prize of all. But this is not how the story ended.

### Story is Played Out

The end of the story would have found the Pharisees seething. They would have been indignant at the treatment of the older brother. Whether they realized they **WERE** the brother or not we do not know, but this was not a story with a warm and fuzzy ending for them. The truth is that Jesus left the ending open so they could repent, but as this story concluded, reality set in.

As story turned to what was real, Jesus went on to teach other parables, to do miracles, and march toward Jerusalem. Within a few months of this open ended tale He entered into Jerusalem the last time where the Pharisees and scribes convened and stated, "**What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation...So from that day on they made plans to put Him to death.**" (John 11:47, 48, 53).

In other words, the decision that the older brother made was to go back to the house, pick up a piece of wood, and beat his father to death publicly.

The irony of this heinous action was that as they unscrupulously worked to put Jesus on the cross, it simultaneously made a way for every sinner to be saved. The death of the Father in the man Jesus Christ was the way God the Father could offer forgiveness through repentance.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us with the same choice as faced each brother. Each brother had to come to grips with who they were. Each had to take responsibility for their own minds, hearts and lives, no longer blaming anyone else and no longer justifying their own goodness. This morning, whether you are a believer or not, we all must examine whether we are living self-righteously or not.

When a newspaper asked famous authors at the time to explain what's wrong with the world, G K Chesterton wrote a simple and bold statement back. "**Dear sirs. I am. Sincerely yours, G.K Chesterton**" Whether or not this is the stuff of myth or legend, the statement bears repeating. The gospel pleads for us to see ourselves in light of our overwhelming sin, so we can taste and see the overwhelming grace and mercy God has for us in Jesus.