

The story of the prodigal sons (yes I said sons) is a story that Jesus told in the midst of Pharisees who were complaining that Jesus was keeping company with the worst sort of sinners. In those days, devout religious men would never share a table of fellowship with people who were outwardly sinful. It would never happen.

Yet, the parable of the prodigal is a story about a relationship between a Father and his son. It's about having a love relationship with God. Think about all the relationships that we have in our life. We have relationships between husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, families, friends. What is so often the case is that our relationships are based on what other people can give us. I want to be friends with the guy who makes me laugh, or the girl that has good connections in business. It even happens between husbands and wives. We desire what is best for us.

Jesus demonstrated this proclivity of ours when he spoke at the Sermon on the Mount about people only loving those who love you. He also warned the Pharisee a few chapters back in Luke about only inviting guests to his banquet that could repay him. This is the way our sinful hearts work. Well, Jesus tells this story of a father and his two sons to show the way that God the Father loves, and the way that we love.

What we are going to see in the parable is that neither of the two sons really loved the Father. They both wanted what the father could give them. This is so often how we approach God. We don't really want an ongoing, loving, conversational relationship with God. We just want the blessings of God when we need them and the rest of the time we can handle it on our own.

This story is not just about a prodigal son. It is about two sons. Jesus told this parable in the presence of Pharisees, who were grumbling, and sinners with whom he was eating.

A man had two sons and the younger son came to him one day and decided that he didn't want to live under the father's rule anymore. The younger son demanded his portion of the inheritance. This was not all that uncommon in those days. The father, before his death, would turn over control of his estate to his son but the father would continue to live there and have use of the estate until his death. What was very uncommon was the fact that the younger son, took his share of the holdings and immediately sold them off so he could leave. This would have disgraced the father and the family.

The person inheriting the estate would never liquidate any of the father's assets until the father actually died. In effect, the son was saying to his father, "I wish you would go ahead and die," or "you are as good as dead to me."

He immediately took all his money and left. He went to a far country and began living it up. He had absolutely no love for the Father himself, he simply took the father's blessing and ran with it. So often, this is the way we treat God. We may come to him and repeat a prayer, or affirm a set of beliefs so that we won't go to hell when

we die. We may also come to him in fervent prayer when grandmother is sick or we need a new job. And when we receive what we have asked for, we go off our own direction.

The prodigal was saying, I don't want to live under your authority. I don't want to live under your household. I don't want to have a continued relationship with you. I don't want to hear your stories, or learn from your ways. I want to do things my way and I am going off to live my own life. This is the heart of rebellion toward God. In Isa 53, the Bible says that each one of us has gone astray – each to his own way. This independent spirit of wanting to be free from our creator and Lord is the heart of all sin and rebellion.

Well, it wasn't long after that that the boy had spent all the money. And to make matters worse, a famine hit the land and he began to starve to death. So he got a job. But this was no ordinary job. To a good little Jewish boy, this was the lowest form of employment he could possibly get. He was pig farming for a Gentile. Pigs were unclean by the law of Moses and the Jews were forbidden from raising them. But here he was, out of money and further away from his sense of right and wrong than he ever wanted to be.

Not only was he a pig farmer, but he also sank to depths even lower than the pigs themselves. He was so hungry that he was actually eating the slop that the pigs were eating. Now, I don't know if you have ever known any pig farmers, but man that is absolutely disgusting. Because, he rebelled against his father and disgraced his family, he now found himself in the worst possible place he could be.

While all this is terrible and disgusting, we will see in a moment that the other brother, who was still at home, was in a far worse predicament.

Sometimes it takes getting down to the lowest places in life before we come to our senses and the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts. The Bible says that the boy “came to himself.” He began looking around at the mess that he made for himself and he knew that he could not continue the way he had been going. So he said, I will go home and become a servant of my father. At least they aren't starving to death.

This was his moment of repentance, but there was still a problem with what he was thinking. He wasn't going home begging for forgiveness, pleading for grace. He wasn't going home as an empty handed beggar, pleading for salvation from his misery. He was going home to “work it off.” He thought that he could become a servant and work for his father and he would eventually get back into his good graces. Maybe he thought he could work as a servant and save money to start a new life. The point is, he still didn't want a relationship with the father; he wanted what the father could give him. One of the most common things that I tell people when I am counseling them about salvation, God, and the gospel is that “if you walk out that door thinking, Man I need to clean up my life and do better,” You have missed the point.

But this is exactly what the prodigal thought. He thought he could go home and work to make everything right. So that is what he decided to do. He started on his way home.

Now while all this was going on, the father spent every day looking out on the horizon hoping that his son would come home. The father didn't care what the boy had done, where he had ended up, or what disgrace he had brought on the family. All he wanted was a relationship with the boy. One day, when he saw the boy on the horizon walking back home, he took out running to meet him. Now this may not seem like a big deal to you, but elderly Jewish men of that day didn't run. In order to run, he would have had to pull up his robes and run bare-legged (maybe even showing some underwear). How undignified is that. But it didn't matter; the boy was coming home. The joy that filled the father's heart overflowed into action.

When they met, the father embraced him and started kissing him. The boy had probably rehearsed the speech he was going to give his father all the way home. He had probably played the scenario out in his mind a hundred times. He was about to give himself to servitude in order to work off the damage and the heartache he had caused.

However, it didn't quite go like he planned. He said, I have sinned against God and you and I am unworthy to be your son. I can imagine him taking a big gulp as he was about to tell the father how he would work off the debt he owed. But, the father interrupted him at that very moment and called for the son's robe, the signet ring, and shoes to be put on his feet. The father was taking him back as a son. The father called for the fattened calf to be killed and a celebration planned.

So often, we come to God the same way the boy came to the father. We want to work off our debt. We think, if I can just come to God and show him how hard I can work, or how good I can be, He will accept me. The boy never even got the words out of his mouth. The father was only interested in having the relationship restored with the son. He didn't care about where the son had been or what he had been doing. There was absolutely nothing the son had that could make up for the wrong that he had done. But, it didn't matter. The father accepted him in grace and gave him the full privileges and authority of sonship.

Now, the son who stayed home was in a far worse predicament. At least the younger son had sunk so low that he could readily see there was nowhere for him to go. He understood that he was at the bottom of the barrel and no one could help him. This is the mindset that men must come to before they can call out to the Savior. So often today, people believe that by simply repeating a prayer and believing historical facts about Jesus and the resurrection, they have done what is necessary to be a Christian. However, the truth is that Christianity is about a relationship with the Father. It is about understanding that we are blind, naked, wretched, unworthy sinners who

deserve the deepest level of God's judgment. Yet, Christ himself paid the cost of that wrath so that we may be free from punishment and declared just in his sight.

The elder brother had not reached this point. He had stayed home and took care of the father's estate. In reality, it was the elder brother's estate. You see at the beginning of the parable, the Bible says that the father divided his estate among both brothers. He gave the younger his share, which he immediately sold off, and he also gave the older his share. He had turned over their inheritance to them.

The elder brother came in from the field, heard the celebration going on, and asked a servant about it. When he found out what was going on, he was furious. How could the father take that boy back after what he did to our family? The elder brother refused to go into the celebration. And once again, we see the grace of the father. Just as the father went out to embrace the younger son who was returning home, the father went out to talk to the elder brother and ask him to come into the celebration.

Through the conversation, the elder brother reveals that his mindset wasn't all that different from the younger brother's. He also viewed himself as working for the father's affection and earning his share of the inheritance. He told his father that he had worked and obeyed and done all the things that he should have done. While the younger brother had done the exact opposite. The elder brother was saying he had earned the right to have a celebration with his friends while the younger brother had earned nothing.

This is what Jesus was trying to get the Pharisees to see. They were just like the elder brother. Instead of welcoming sinners who wanted to come to God for salvation and enjoy the celebration of being reconciled to God, the Pharisees were angry that God was allowing them salvation. The Pharisees had been the ones that had worked and slaved for righteousness, how could God give the greatest blessing in the universe to these people, when the Pharisees are the ones who have been doing all the work?

Both brothers in the story were lost. The younger was lost in a far country, beaten, humiliated, and repentant. The elder brother was lost at home, thinking that his efforts and his labors were earning his position before the father. The only person who truly understood what was going on was the father. He loved both sons equally, with equal grace. He went out to meet both sons in the midst of their sin to call them back home.

At the end of the story, one son is in the banquet hall celebrating the restoration of his relationship and one son is outside wallowing in his anger and self-pity. Yet, Jesus doesn't provide an end to the story. He does not tell us whether the older son went in to the banquet or not. The question is left completely open.

In the same way, you will have to write the end of your story. Will you go into the banquet with the king of kings, understanding that you have earned nothing by all your efforts and all your work? If you are a son, you are a son because of the grace of God and nothing else. There is no way to earn your place. In fact, if you and I were to get what we deserved, we would be cast away from the father forever. The only way relationship with the father can be reconciled is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He made the way for us to come. He made the way for the father to throw his arms around us and put a new robe upon our backs.

Will you go in, knowing that you are not worthy? Will you lay down any claim of goodness, or entitlement? If not, you will not enter.