

## The Garden of Repentance

### Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Rivet your attention to him. Whatever you do, don't take your eyes off him. You have heard me read the story. You have seen him in action. You have felt his emotions. You have heard him speak. But if you miss him, you miss the whole point of this famous parable that Jesus tells here in Luke 15.

- He is the main character of the story. The spotlight is forever on him ... even in those verses when he is not center stage.
- Who are we talking about?

#### The Father

History has assigned the title "prodigal" to the younger son in this little drama. And through the years many of us – me included – believed that the word prodigal meant something like "evil, dirty, ungrateful, sinful." But that's not true.

Prodigal means "extravagant, lavish, abundant, unrestrained."

That definition doesn't fit the younger son ... at least not consistently throughout this story. He might be those things when he has some money to throw around, but those characteristics last only as long as the cash. When it is gone, he is no longer "prodigal."

The only truly consistent prodigal in this story is the father. His love for both of his sons is extravagant. It knows no limits. His forgiveness has no boundaries. His joy has no restraint.

These weeks leading up to Easter we are on a journey from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of the Empty Tomb. And along the way we are learning about the devastating impact that sin has on our world and in our lives. The goal is that you, with me, will long for that empty tomb on Easter Sunday, so much so that on Easter Sunday when I say "Christ is risen," you will be bursting at the seams to say "Christ is risen indeed." And you might even be tempted to add a "hallelujah" on the end.

As a part of our Lenten journey, I have asked you to memorize our theme verse for this year, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

Those words are important because the story of redemption is the story of two gardens – from Garden to Garden. From Eden to the Empty Tomb. This memory verse illustrates that truth by associating two men with those two gardens: Adam and Jesus.

The parable that Jesus tells in Luke 15 is set against the backdrop of a complaint made by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Imagine! The Pharisees and teachers of the law are complaining about something Jesus was doing. Can you believe it?

- In this instance they were not happy with the company Jesus kept.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

No self-respecting Savior would hang out with sinners, would He? Of course He would. That's why He came!

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

To answer the complaints of those Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus introduced them and us to a son and his dad. Truthfully, the story is about us and God, because their story is a perfect picture of our own journey from Eden to the Empty Tomb. The story is told in three contrasts:

### **CONTRAST #1: THE SON TAKES; THE FATHER GIVES**

Look at verse 12:

The younger (son) said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So (the father) divided his property between (his two sons). (Luke 15:2)

The son kept his agenda well-hidden. He did not say "Dad I want to go blow my half of the estate on the evils of life." But I'm sure the father knew, and despite what he knew he willingly gave to his son. The son took. The father gave.

What would prompt a son to leave a father who is that generous? There is no hint in the parable that the father was harsh or demanding. He wasn't a dictator. From all appearances, this dad provided well for his sons. But the son wanted out. No matter how wonderful his dad was, the son didn't want to be there anymore.

You know, God is truly like the father in this story.

- In the Garden of Eden He provided Adam and Eve with the best of everything.
- And despite the fact that we are not in Eden anymore, look around you. God has given each of us access to all the resources of life that we need: intellect, emotions, health, a beautiful world, friends and family.

One of the great verses in the Scripture proclaims:

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

But the son had an "I" problem. Two "I" problems. Independence and Indulgence.

- He wanted to be in charge of his own life.
- He wanted to do whatever he felt like doing.
- Neither of those was possible at home.

There are a bunch of “I” problems at work in our world.

- In fact, have you ever noticed that right there is an “I” problem in the middle of every SIN. See it? S-I-N.
- Satan works really hard to convince us that I know what's best for me so I should take full control of my life. I bet you have the same problem.

## **CONTRAST #2: THE SON LEFT; THE FATHER WAITED**

Verse 13:

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country... (Luke 15:13)

Where was that distant land? The parable doesn't say. It doesn't have to.

- Because the distant is not a geographical location.
- The distant country is a condition of our hearts.
- In other words, this boy left home mentally long before he left home physically.

What do I mean by that?

- Our journey to the distant land starts with little things first, then gradually grows.
- We start thinking about how life could and should be different. About how we could what we want, and we begin to replace what we know to be true with the lies of the devil.

That's how the journey out of Eden started, right?

Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'? (Genesis 3:1)

- We start to make our decisions without consulting God in them. Maybe our prayer life and devotional life fade away. Church attendance becomes more and more sporadic.
- Things we once would never have tolerated are now acceptable.

Historically people have characterized this son as a drunk, a drug addict, someone who was sexually promiscuous, a criminal, a loser. Those are easy labels to apply to a person who squanders the resources we can see.

- You and I would never be any of those things.
- But what about those things we can't see? What about the person who wastes their potential? Who neglects their family? Who fritters away their time?

One day when Jesus was talking to His disciples, He posed a question to them:

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:36-37)

You see, when we try to fill our lives with anything or anyone other than Jesus we will eventually find ourselves in a distant country.

- That distant country will take everything from you.
- It robbed this Jewish boy of his entire inheritance and left him knee-deep in a pigsty fighting the pigs for slop to eat.

### **CONTRAST #3: THE SON RETURNED; THE FATHER FORGAVE**

Verse 17:

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father ... (Luke 15:17-18)

God doesn't have to send difficulties our way. Life is full of them anyway. They come naturally.

- It is often in the midst of those difficulties that we, like that son, "come to our senses."
- While we are fighting the pigs, we find ourselves asking: What am I doing? My life isn't turning out as I had planned.
- And if our senses return, we eventually say "I am going home."

The son had a carefully rehearsed speech, repenting and apologizing. But he never got to offer it ... because waiting for him was the PRODIGAL FATHER.

- Every day the father was waiting for his son to come home.
- I picture him standing on the front porch every day, looking as far down the road as he could see, waiting to get a glimpse of his returning son.

My dad had a unique walk. He could be a long way away, but you could tell it was him just by the way he walked. His one leg would swing to one side.

- There was a story about the day dad flew into the Dayton Airport after being stationed in Korea. My grandpa and grandma Brodbeck and my mom were there waiting for him. Mom was still a girlfriend at that point, but she was there.
- Whenever a soldier would come into view in the distance, my grandma and mom would jump up, and my grandpa would say "Sit down. That's not him." And sure enough, it would be a different soldier.
- But then came the moment Grandpa Brodbeck recognized that walk. "There he is." And according to the story, he was the first one out of his seat.
- Do you get the point? Even from a distance the father recognized his son who was coming home.

### **APPLICATION**

Mark Twain was once asked to identify the greatest story he had ever read. He answered, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Mark Twain never explained why he thought that was so. But let me give you my opinion.

This is the greatest story because it is the story of every person who has ever lived.

- We all push away from our God and head toward the distant country. That's what sin does.
  - In Eden, Adam and Eve hid from God to avoid Him.
- We all – I believe – eventually will come to understand that the things we thought would satisfy us, don't.
  - Ultimately we all discover there is something missing. And it's not in the pigsty.

And when we that moment, the only place to go ... is home.

- Some of us will make that decision and decide to go back to our PRODIGAL HEAVENLY FATHER where we will experience all that He wants to give us, know firsthand the depth of His love for us, and learn what it means to be fully forgiven.
- Some of us won't.
  - But God continues to wait on the front porch, watching for that first glimpse.

If your heart is still distant from Christ, today is a good day to start for home. The Scriptures promise that if we ...

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

Let me pray with you.

Amen.