

SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 3/26/17



PRODIGAL

THE GOD OF UNRESTRAINED GRACE

Our new Lenten Series, **Prodigal: The God of Unrestrained Grace**, centers on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15. The series will carry us throughout the Lenten season, including Easter Sunday, as we look at this parable and its themes of grace and forgiveness. The series dovetails with our Lenten Art Exhibition, "A Father & His Two Sons: The Art of Forgiveness," which includes 43 pieces by artists including Rembrandt, J.J. Tissot, and Thomas Hart Benton that were inspired by the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We encourage you to visit the exhibition and meditate on this powerful parable as we consider the story from the perspective of the father and both of his sons.

THE OTHER LOST SON • Luke 15:25-30 • Tim McConnell • March 26, 2017

What is happening with this older brother? Now we see why we shouldn't be happy calling this the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." The younger son's story is only part of it. Not even the most interesting part to be honest. Now we see that the older son, the so-called obedient one, is just as lost—if not more lost—than the son who went far afield and made a mess of things. The first son hit rock bottom. It isn't that hard to convince a guy standing knee deep in pig excrement that he may have made a wrong turn somewhere along the way! But this older son thinks he is on the right track. This son thinks he is doing everything right to earn a good reward. Convincing him to turn around is not going to be easy at all.

A man went to interview an artist to have his portrait made. Coming home he said to his wife, "I don't know if this artist will be able to do me justice." His wife said, "Oh, my dear. At this stage it isn't justice you should be looking for in a portrait. You should have asked for mercy!" Preachers have been getting laughs from that one for 200 years. I still love it. Justice is not what we need, but mercy. We long for justice in the world, but in our relationship with God, believe me, the last thing you want is what you deserve for your behavior. At this stage it is mercy I need. The older brother wants what he thinks is justice, his just desserts—what he thinks is fair in his own mind. He can't get his head around mercy. Is this a challenge for you? In your relationship with your spouse, or your brother, or your friend? We want to receive mercy, but we don't always like to see it dispensed to others. We want mercy to flow to us but not *through* us to others. And our hardness of heart can reveal that we are standing in the wrong place before God. If we resent seeing others forgiven, if we are non-generous in our living, if we are non-forgiving with others, if we are non-understanding, non-sympathetic with the lost sons around us, we might just be in the wrong posture before God. What we learn from the older brother is this: Love for leverage is no love at all.

Luke 15 is a complete whole. This story doesn't stand alone. Jesus is addressing a crowd of two groups, the tax-collectors and sinners on one side and the Pharisees and teachers on the other. The religious don't like that Jesus welcomes sinners. It is in response to the grumbling of the religious, the

morally superior, that Jesus told these stories. He told a story about a lost sheep. The sheep got lost and someone went out to get it. A lost coin. The coin got lost and the woman sought it and found it. Now a son is lost. Who goes to find him? I'll tell you who should have gone: the older brother. The father couldn't go; it would not have been right. But the brother could have gone. The brother *should* have gone; some say it would have been a duty in his day. But there was something wrong in his heart. And we better figure out what it is. We need to figure this out. Because you know what? I look around this morning and I don't see a lot of us in the room who are seriously tempted by the track of the younger son—not really. But I see a lot, and when I look in the mirror, I see a lot of us who could easily spend the rest of our lives locked in the spiritual death-spiral we see in the older brother. We need to watch out on this side. We need to learn, and remember, that love for reward isn't love. Love for what we can get out of it is not love. Love for leverage is no love at all.

Verse 25, "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in." (Luke 15:25-28) Why is the older brother upset? You know, the way Jesus sets this story up, he sets it all up so every listener is outraged at the wrongs the father and the older brother suffer. This guy has good reason to be upset. Let's add it up. His brother demands his inheritance. Never mind the personal insult; that costs one-third of the family estate. Wealth was land and animals. They had to sell. The loss to the family wealth was much greater than 33%. Wealth, gone. Reputation, gone. Family name, gone. Off his brother goes to party.

When he shows up again on the horizon, everybody in earshot of Jesus is expecting one of two things. When a disobedient son returns to a town there are two things that might happen. The elders of the town can go out and meet him at the gate and ceremonially break a pot signifying he is out-cast forever, or the older brother and his friends could meet him with stones. Either of these would

go a long way to restoring the family name. But no, the father runs out and embraces him—maybe to keep those things from happening. The son is restored, given the best robe, the family ring, restored to his place in the household. Think for a minute, it probably means when the father dies this son is now in place to receive a third of the estate again! Then the party, the fattened calf, the celebration—all the expense. And here's a final piece. According to scholars if a father held a banquet, it was the ceremonial role of the oldest son to play the kind of "head waiter." He was to stand behind the patriarch and keep everything moving with the servants. The older brother was supposed to go in and serve – serve in this celebration of his deviant brother. Too much. No way.

Do you know what Jesus is doing here? He's digging around in the hearts of the Pharisees and teachers. No older brother would be expected to bear such a sacrifice. Jesus is saying, in a way, "Look, I know it's hard. I know it hurts. I get it. Believe me," Jesus is saying, "believe me I know what it costs to get the lost home. But you should be celebrating. If you shared your father's heart, if you decided to participate instead of growing more and more sour, if you had a hint, a whiff, of the joy of the father in you—you could rush in and join the party. Turn." But they don't. There is something wrong in the heart of the older brother. The older brother is just as lost as the younger, maybe more. He loves only for what he can get out of it—and love for leverage is no love at all.

This is a story of two lost sons, not just a story about a party-boy come home. This is a story of two lost sons. Both of these sons are doing the same thing, they both want the same thing. They just go after it in two ways. What do they want? They want to get what the father has to give them. One does it directly. "Give me my inheritance today." The other does it quietly, dutifully, "Give me my inheritance when I earn it." One parties, the other works, but at the end of the day neither one shares the heart of the father, neither one loves the father, they are both waiting for their father to die—which is just a way of saying, of asking: Why are you in it with God? What are you doing in your relationship with God? Are you here because you love God and want to be in His presence? Are you here because God has captured your heart and you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all

your soul, and all your strength, and all your mind? Are you here because when you worship God you feel His joy and you want your life and soul and being transformed by His love and grace? Are you here to dance in His joy? Or are you here to get something? Are you here to try to add one more weight to your side of the scale, to try to get it to tip to your side, so God is required, absolutely obligated to give you blessing? Love for leverage is no love at all.

In his book *Prodigal God*, Tim Keller tells a little story to make this point. Once upon a time, a peasant came before a king with a carrot. "I've been farming all my life," he said, "and when this carrot came out, it was perfect. I said to myself, now that's a carrot fit for a king! You are a good king. So, well, here it is." The king was moved to tears. His heart warmed and he granted the peasant a plot of land of his own to farm. A court official saw this and had an idea. The next day he brought in his prize horse. "If a carrot gets a farm," he thought, "what will I get?" The king received the gift with a courteous thank you. No more. The man was enraged. He steamed and steamed and finally stormed in to get an answer. The king explained, "The peasant gave me the carrot. You were giving *yourself* the horse."

Oh how critical it is—I will say it again—how critical it is to learn to worship well. O Lord, I come into Your presence, I come into Your courts of praise; expecting nothing in return, wanting nothing but to glorify Your name in all the earth. I come to dwell in the house of the Lord, I come to join the heart of the Father, I come for communion with God—at the heart of our gathering there is joy in union with Christ. I come for you, God. For you. All for you. Only for you. I come for you. Not for what you can do for me; just for you, Jesus.

Elder brother lostness is much more dangerous than obvious disobedience; much more pernicious; much more joy-stealing. Most people who leave church or don't come back, do you know what it is? It isn't that they saw God and found Him lacking. It isn't that they saw Jesus and didn't like Him. Jesus had sinners and tax collectors and Pharisees and teachers all around Him. People who are not like Jesus still like Jesus. People turn away from church because they encounter an older brother, sour and bitter. One who makes no room and resists all cost to redeem a sinner. One who prides himself on

self-righteousness and superiority. That's what drives people away. Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." I love your Christ; it's your Christians I can't stand. Let's resolve to share the Father's heart, to share Christ's heart for the lost. Let's be the first to drop our shovels and run to the gate, to the front door, to run out the porch and down the lawn and beat the father to the embrace.

But even more importantly, let's get our hearts right with God, today, right now. Love for leverage is no love at all. "But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.'" (Luke 15:29) Well, why? Why were you "slaving"? You can't leverage God, you can't force God's hand and obligate God's blessing. It's so sniveling, isn't it? So sour. Older brother lostness is marked with bitterness, joy-less duty, fear-based morality, legalism. Why were you "slaving," why did you get into that posture with me, why were you working so hard when all that I have is yours? The answer is, "Because I wanted to earn my right to salvation; I wanted to enter on my terms. I wanted to be my own savior." You can't do that. You can't be your own savior. We, all of us, have gone astray like lost sheep—that's why Jesus is the shepherd. We, all of us, have slipped down into the mud like lost coins—that's why Jesus is like the woman who seeks and finds. We are all but sinners saved by grace. We are all but beggars telling one another where to find bread. Let's get our hearts right with God right now. The stakes could not be higher. Do you see? At the end of the parable, the young son is inside, in the joy of the Father, in the eternal feast. The older...he's lost. And that one was in church every single Sunday morning.

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STUDY GUIDE

"Prodigal: The Other Lost Son"

Luke 15:25-30

Start It

- Imagine a conversation between your neighbors, or two people who know you at work or school. "She's religious. She goes to church, I think. Like almost every Sunday." "Really? I didn't see her that way." "I know, she seems so normal. Why do you think she does it? Why does she think she needs to go to church?" What comes next? They might make a few guesses. She has been through a hard time lately and needs community. She seems happy, but is really on the edge of depressed all the time. Or, she likes to please those around her; I guess that means God too. She must be trying to impress God.

Study It

- Go back to Luke 15:1-2. To whom is this parable most directly applicable?
- Read Luke 15:25-27. What significance is there to the older brother being "in the field"? Why does a servant know what the brother does not? Is Jesus saying anything there about the brother's distance from the heart of the father? How should the older brother respond after hearing what the servant reports?
- Read Luke 15:28-30. Why is the older brother angry? What is the father in the story forced to do? Did the shepherd in Luke 15:3-7 or the woman in Luke 15:8-10 have to convince people to join the celebration? What is happening here with the father and the older brother?
- Read back and take note of how the older brother speaks of the disobedient son. Does he claim him as his brother? Who tells him he is his brother?
- Does the older brother have a healthy relationship with his father? What can that tell us about our relationship with God? What is Jesus trying to warn us about?

Pray It

Lord our God, it is a great joy to come into the celebration You have made. Draw our hearts into worship without agenda, with no expectation of return, only to celebrate and sing of Your goodness and grace, only to lift Your name above all names, only to glorify You, our God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Eliminate jealousy and envy: write a genuine note of glad congratulations to someone for a blessing they have received from God.