

“O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?” (Parable of the Prodigal Son).

Sermon, Ken Bailey, January 8-9, 2022

Have you ever been treated respectfully by someone you suspected was just doing it because something was in it for them and that really they didn't much like you?

Today we return to the story of the prodigal son.

(Read Luke 15:11-32)

The main plot and players of this parable of Jesus have been dissected many times.

The Father figure represents God. The son who left the home represents nominal Jews who did not keep the Law. The obedient yet angry son who did not leave represents the religious Jews who prided themselves on keeping the Law and who looked down on the others.

Jesus' focus in this parable (and the two parables that immediately preceded it) is on God's desire to bring back that which was lost. This contrasted with the opinion of the religious Jews, who felt that the lost deserved the consequences they got and held themselves aloof; they claimed a real Christ would spend His time with the righteous, not sinners.

It is worth noting that before the younger son returned home, he admitted his guilt to himself. He prepared to also admit his guilt to his father. The confession was not intended to buy the father's favor; the son was prepared to confess even if the father refused him. He realized his sin had made him unworthy of sonship, and he admitted it.

Although the father was willing to forgive the son without an admission of guilt, until the son came to recognize the hurt that he had caused, he was not able to truly accept the father's forgiving love.

“O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?” (Parable of the Prodigal Son).

Sermon, Ken Bailey, January 8-9, 2022

The real point of the story is that forgiveness is freely and graciously available. One’s ability to accept forgiveness – to put it on and wear it -- is related to the degree one is willing to first address one’s guilt.

Other words of Jesus imply that gratitude is proportional to one’s sense of being undeserving of God’s kindness. One who is forgiven much, loves much, but he who loves little [shows that he has been] forgiven little. (Luke 7:47).

Back to our story...

There are two types of lost people in the world that are being sought by God –

- 1) Those who are unwilling to submit to the rules and constraints of being acceptable to God, and who refuse to do so, and –
- 2) Those who obey rules and constraints to appear acceptable, but who fail to develop a relationship with the God of the rules and therefore serve the rules themselves rather than the God who gave them.

Those in the second group tend to become legalistic and self-righteous, trusting in themselves that they are acceptable (due to their performance) while they despise others who are unwilling to perform. (Luke 18:9).

The damning clue to the presence of self-righteousness lies in how the rule-keeper regards rule-rejector.

God, who has every right to thrust the rule rejector out of his kingdom, instead seeks out and saves that which was lost.

In contrast, the Pharisees, who were supposed to represent God, were content to write off the lost as deserving damnation. They were offended that Jesus lovingly sought the lost instead of shunning them.

With disdain toward Jesus, they said (as recorded in Luke 7:39), “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him, and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.” And, in Luke 15:2, they said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus responded to that last comment with three parables about seeking that which was lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost “prodigal” son.

In his indictment of the Pharisees at the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus used their indifference toward the lost to condemn the Pharisees twice – both involving their criticism that he welcomed the sinners who came to him.

The Pharisees were critical that “sinners” were coming to Jesus and that he was receiving and teaching them. Jesus found fault with their attitude on two levels:

- a) Firstly, that the Pharisees saw themselves as worthy of God’s attention and the multitudes as not worthy.
- b) Secondly, the Pharisees who condemned Jesus for not shunning sinners refused to see as a good thing that sinners were responding to Jesus’ words and coming to be with Him. This was not a terrible thing God would reject, but welcome – God was seeking those who were lost, the lost were responding, and this proved Jesus’ teaching was of God. (See Matthew 21:31-32).

So, what drives a religious person to sink into legalism and self-righteousness?

The Pharisees (and the older son in the earlier parable) were guilty of two major sins: Pride, and Hypocrisy.

They were guilty of pride, in that they felt that they deserved God’s favor due to their efforts. They thought that they were doing God a great favor to live such dedicated lives, and that He should be grateful to them for the price they were willing to pay to obey Him. They refused to acknowledge their personal sin and need of His grace. They had no gratitude for what God was willing to do to accept them into His graces.

Secondly, they were guilty of hypocrisy. They pretended to love being servants of God, but the way they conducted their obedience proved otherwise. The book of Malachi gives a number of evidence of this where God lists the ways his priests have angered rather than pleased him.

They had despised His name with second-rate gifts and sacrifices, keeping the good stuff to themselves. They sniffed at their service and referred to it as “a weariness.” They hid their own struggles with sins and looked down their noses at the sins of others. Jesus said they appeared from the outside as beautiful buildings that inside were tombs filled with unclean rotting bones.

And they taught as God’s rules the precepts of men. They made the walk with God for those who listened to them a trail of hard labor rather than a partnership of love. And they did not apply many of their rules to their own selves.

“O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?” (Parable of the Prodigal Son).

Sermon, Ken Bailey, January 8-9, 2022

We need to be careful that we do fall into the same patterns of behavior as the Pharisees and legalists.

Let us not place our confidence in standards about dress, language, etc. Let us not trust in our religious activities and track record for our worthiness to have God’s love. When it comes to being worthy, we are all sinners, made in the image of God but rotten to the core, even though we might be nice at least part of the time.

The Bible says that, while we were yet ENEMIES, Christ died for us. Each of us was born an enemy of God, regardless of how nice we are.

No one deserves to be saved. But God loves his enemies. God forgives his enemies. The ones who look scuzzy... and the ones who look nice.

When a person is confronted with their fallenness, there are two responses that can be made:

We can hide our guiltiness and hope no one sees it. We can salve our conscience with good works, assuring ourselves that God should be satisfied with them. We can look down on those unwilling to work to please God, convincing ourselves that we are more deserving of God’s patience than they.

Or we can humble ourselves, face the pain of being confronted with being proved unworthy in our own righteousness to demand God’s acceptance, and then gratefully believe God’s word that He accepts us anyway, at great cost to Himself – and let go of our guilt and embrace Him.

This reality, that we are in ourselves helpless to deserve God’s approval, but that it is available anyway at just a willingness to admit

“O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?” (Parable of the Prodigal Son).

Sermon, Ken Bailey, January 8-9, 2022

this face and accept it, is a hard statement. It is hard to listen to, it is hard to believe, it is hard to feel safe in, especially if our emotions feel it cannot be true. But we walk by faith, not by sight – God says that in this we are accepted in His Christ, and we must believe it is so. Nothing further required, nothing further that we can do. Only then can real peace come.

The Bible says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. We humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt us at the proper time. We come to Him on His terms.

And, like the experience of the two young men in the story of the Prodigal Son, we relate to God the Father in a new way – not like the older son, seeing his father as a set of rules and tasks that, if obeyed, would give him a right to expect an inheritance that will make him rich and powerful –

--but, as the younger son found out, as One who would rush out to meet us, kiss us, embrace us, and say, Rejoice with me!’ This son of mine, who was lost, has been found! He was dead but has come back to life!

Let us pray.