

God and the Respectable

Series: Treasures of the Parables

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Read the Scripture: Luke 15:25-32

Today we are discussing a parable from Luke's Gospel which reveals the fatherhood of God and is one of the greatest parables in the Scriptures to picture a father's heart. It occurs as a part of the parable of lost things, which our Lord told as a result of the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes because of his actions to the outcasts of his day. These outcasts were inviting him home to dinner and he was accepting. The scribes and Pharisees were offended and complained against him because of this. To answer their complaint our Lord gave the great parable of the lost things; one parable, falling into three parts. There we learn how God views the lost. The first division is the parable of the lost sheep (some are lost through ignorance); then the parable of the lost coin (some are lost through neglect), and now the parable of the lost sons. This, too, falls into two parts. The first is the parable of the rebellious son (those who are lost through rebellion), and now the parable of the respectable son.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' (Luke 15:25-32 RSV)

As in the other parables, our Lord sets in direct contrast two attitudes. They are revealed through the respective actions of the son and the father. Jesus calls our attention to the actions of the son first. He is working in the field when the younger son returns

from the far country, and thus does not get home until after the festivities are under way. It is an exquisite touch on our Lord's part to put this boy out working in the field. There is something about hard work that seems to awaken a self-righteous attitude within us. How many have heard (or used) the old phrase. "I've been slaving all day over a hot stove!" There is something about putting forth effort that makes us look down on those who do not.

So the boy comes in from the field and hears the merriment. He makes inquiry and one of the servants tells him that his brother has come home and his father is exceedingly happy about it. We would expect some kind of positive reaction from the elder son after all the years of separation from his brother, but the Lord hastens to make clear that this son's reaction is anything but positive. The news is met by an immediate expression of jealousy and anger, expressed in the most infantile of terms. He begins to sulk and pout like a little boy, and refuses to go into the house. When the father comes out to urge him to come in all the pent-up inward rage comes boiling out. The father's request is met with a flood of bitterness.

Notice the emphasis on self in what the boy says. He was angry and answered his father. "Lo, these many years have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." Hear also the contempt for his brother and blame toward his father. "This son of yours, who has devoured your living with harlots, when he came you killed for him the fatted calf." The whole expression is one of extreme resentment and bitterness. How familiar this is to us. We have not only heard it, but we have said it. Listening to our Lord's story of the rebellious son who went into the far country we all knew how he felt; we could identify with him. But now we stand in the shoes of this elder brother. There is not one among us who has not reacted this way, who has not felt what this boy felt when he found himself gripped by a paroxysm of jealous rage.

Perhaps it would help to analyze this a bit that we might more clearly recognize the symptoms of this reaction. How easy it is to be blind to ourselves. Others can see us so much more clearly than we can see ourselves. Because of this congenital blindness an objective picture like this helps us recognize, in some moment of truth, what is happening to us. Having studied it in this impersonal way we may be able to recognize it when it happens again.

There are three characteristics that are always present when this attitude is being expressed, and our Lord brings them out beautifully here:

The first one (and it always begins here) is a sense of being treated unfairly, a sense of being ignored, of being forgotten or disregarded. "You never gave me a kid, that I might make merry." There is expressed the hurt of being apparently ignored or forgotten. This feeling of unfair treatment is always the initial mark of a self-centered attitude. It is the sign of crushed pride, of wounded ego, revealing the centrality of self. Its most common expression -- as this story brings out is that of anger and a "won't play" attitude. "I'm gonna take my marbles and go home!"

Probably the most extreme expression of this in the Bible is found in the days of King David, who had a Counselor, a very astute and wise man, named Ahithophel. Ahithophel gave King David some advice one day, but his other counselors advised him to the contrary. King David chose to follow the advice of the others and not that of Ahithophel. When Ahithophel heard that the king had disregarded his advice he went home, put his household in order, and hanged himself. That is the picture of those who, like this older brother, are resentful, bitter, and upset within because of a sense of unfair treatment.

The second mark our Lord brings out here is that of an over-inflated view of self. Notice how the older brother describes his own superiorities and advantages. Self-righteousness is always full of self-praise: "Lo, I have served you all these many years." It is in his view entirely a matter of making contribution to his father. There is no recognition whatsoever of what he has learned through these many years, or how much he has profited by the relationship with his father, how much benefit he has derived from it. In his view it is all one way. "I have been slaving for you. I have been giving of myself to you all these years." We recognize this attitude, do we not? How easily it comes to our lips.

"And I never disobeyed you." Certainly that is not true. No one has ever lived up to that kind of a standard. It is remarkable how easily he can conveniently forget the many times the Father has forgiven him his disobedience, and he has been restored and brought back into fellowship. Yet here, there is nothing but the expression of the elder sons' strong points. His view of himself is that of being completely and wholly in the right. That is always a mark of self-righteousness.

The third mark is his blame of and contempt for others -- his blame of his father and his contempt for his brother. "This son of yours ..." You can hear the cutting edge of contempt in that. He does not call him his brother and there is no love expressed for the younger son as a brother, and no gladness at his return. He rather views him as something vile, something despicable, something contemptible, as his language reveals. Also there is no love or respect for his father. Oddly enough, in some strange perverted way, as frequently happens, the father ends up with all the blame. It is all his fault. "You never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but you killed the fatted calf for this son of yours, this contemptible wretch!" How many times have we heard that reaction expressed? It is like a little boy who is running along and falls down. He looks up at his mother and says, "Look what you made me do!"

I here are the three marks of self-righteousness. Whenever it appears it is always thus characterized. How clear and accurate our Lord's analysis is. This is the world's most deadly sin. Our Lord spoke of this more frequently than of any other sin. He dealt with it more severely and more sharply than any other sin. He could be tender, gracious, and accepting toward those who were involved in adultery, or drunkenness or demon possession, but when he faced self-righteous Pharisees in their smug complacency his words burn and sear and scorch. This sin is deadly because it is so easily disguised as something justifiable. This is what is wrong with a self-righteous spirit. It can always be proved by the book to be right. There is always an aspect of it that looks right. That characteristic is here in this story, is it not? There is a sense in which this son can be justified for his attitude. As he sees the picture it looks to him perfectly justifiable that he should feel as he does. But that is always the mark of self-righteousness. It is an apparent right to be nasty to other people. How often we find this among us!

This is peculiarly the sin of Christians. It is expressed in the attitude of those who view the church as a kind of club that belongs to "our kind of people," and who, in one way or another, are resistant to the inroads of others. They want the church to be a group for white, middle class, Anglo-Saxons, or, perhaps, only for Republicans, and heaven help a Democrat who finds his way into it! But this is all wrong. This is self-righteousness. The church of Jesus Christ is to be what Christ wants it to be -- a gathering place for all who have been redeemed; washed, made anew, alive in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is also the sin of those who have no interest in the lost, either at home or abroad; who think that missions are a waste of time; who have no concern for those who live in darkness and blindness, either around us (in increasing numbers today), or in far distant parts of the earth. They view them all as disreputable, the unwashed, the despicable; hippies, peons, or savages, not worth saving. I saw a bumper tag on a car the other day that really hit me. It read, "Even Dirty Old Men Need Love." And it is true, is it not? Especially dirty old men!

Yet so subtle is this evil, so deeply imbedded in the heart, that it can even show up as the spirit of the elder brother against those who have the spirit of the elder brother! In other words, we can become the snob's snob. We look down on those who look down on people! Some, who have been set free from a harsh, critical, legalistic, judgmental, elder brother spirit then begin to look down upon the harsh, critical, legalistic, judgmental fundamentalists. That too is wrong, is it not?

This last week I heard of a well-known Christian university which advertises itself as "The World's Most Unusual University" which has erected a steel woven fence around its property, and is now equipping its security guards with machine guns. The press is picking this up and flinging it over the country as an example of what Christianity really is. When I read that, I felt very smug that I didn't have that kind of an attitude. "God, I thank you that I am not like these fundamentalists!" Then I had to judge my own heart for its critical, elder-brother spirit toward these who, having said all else about them, are still brothers in Jesus Christ.

How this all contrasts with the actions of the father in the story. He said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." Here is true fatherhood. It has two characteristics: First, notice that this father came out to meet the angry boy. Just as he went out to meet the returning rebel, so he goes out to seek this sulking son. Jesus is thus saying, God loves the self-righteous, the smug, the self-centered legalist even as he loves the rebellious and defiant.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, in Chapter 6, there is a word which has always arrested me. It is Luke's account of the sermon on the mount, which Matthew also records. In Verse 35, Jesus says,

"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High[i.e., you will make it evident to everyone that you are the sons of the Most High, if you display this attitude]; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:35-36 RSV)

How beautifully that attitude is displayed in this account of the elder brother! The father comes to seek him out despite his sulking, pouting reaction. When he finds him he does not scold, berate, or rebuke harshly, but he entreats him. Nothing reveals the heart of a true father more than this, for there is nothing more difficult for a father to bear than a selfish, truculent child. Shakespeare said, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth is a thankless child."

But this father controls his reaction through love. I am sure he felt, as all of us feel on such occasions, the sharp rising of the flesh against this selfish spirit, this terrible self-centeredness, this frightful lack of love for his brother. He must have renounced the rising of anger, for he does not express it. He comes out and entreats his son. "Look, son, all mine is yours. Don't be angry because I gave a kid to your brother to celebrate with. You could have had one anytime you wanted it, if you had but asked for it. Everything I have is yours. But you never asked."

Here is revealed the tragedy of this son's relationship. A self-righteous attitude frequently occurs in those who are sitting in the midst of great possibility, but never claim it. They get upset when they see others, whom they feel do not deserve anything, coming in and getting what they could have had, but never asked for, never claimed. This is the problem here.

It reveals that this son is actually more lost than the other was. He, too, is in a far country -- a far country of the spirit -- far removed from the father's heart. He does not understand his father. He has never learned to share the same spirit his father has, and the reason is because he never asked, never tried. He took for granted all that was given him and made no effort to move further.

So his father entreats, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Now don't be angry because I have shown love and grace to your brother." Notice how he corrects him. He does not say, "my son," but he calls him "your brother." "For this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found; and therefore it is fitting to celebrate."

Jesus ends the story with this boy standing outside the house. We do not know what happened. He is nursing his wounded ego and whether he repents, goes in, and joins the festivity or not, we do not know. Jesus leaves the question hanging in the air.

The story was addressed, obviously, to the Pharisees and scribes who were showing just this spirit of the elder brother. But the Lord leaves it there, as though he is saying to them, "Look now, it is up to you. This is the way you are before God. God loves you, but your selfish, self-righteous, self-justifying spirit has put you, too, in a far country. Unless you are ready to see yourself as you are and respond to the love of God, you will remain where you are -- outside, and not in."

How many times this spirit appears in the stories, parables, and comments of our Lord! It is unquestionably from this group there will come those people who, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, will come to him at the end and say, "Lord, Lord, have we not done mighty works in thy name? Have we not done great things in your name, cast out demons, and done mighty works?" But he will say to them, "Depart from me, for I never knew you," (Matthew 7:22-23). Yes, you were in the midst of everything, but you never entered into anything. You never caught on, you never laid hold of what was available to you. So, by your own judgment, you have left yourself outside. That is where our Lord leaves this story, and that is where we shall have to leave it.

I am sure there were some among them who did see what he was getting at, who judged their harsh, critical, spirits. Surely we need to do the same. Nothing is more damaging to the cause of Christ than the censorious blame we cast at each other before the world. They see harsh judgmentalism in Christians who ought to be speaking in love, grace, and mercy. If we are to display the same Spirit as our Lord, we must begin by judging this hard attitude within us, and become warm, tender, and compassionate toward those who, in rebellion, have wandered away. We are all that kind of people, ourselves.

As we come to the end of this story and hear ringing in our ears the notes of selfishness, resentment, and bitterness of this elder brother we know that here is our kind of people, too. There is not one of us who has not been guilty of this. So we must judge ourselves in the light of God's word.

Prayer

Our Father, we who have been rebels have found you to be gracious, tender, merciful and compassionate when we returned from the far country. Now, Lord, save, us from turning around and being harsh, judgmental, demanding, and full of blame toward those who are like what we once were. How clearly your word judges both attitudes and shows us that only what is in accord with the Father's heart is true fatherhood and true Christianity. Grant, Lord, that we may manifest that which is so desperately needed in this hour. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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