

The Way of the Kingdom

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Preacher: Elliott Lytle

[0 : 0 0] All right, good morning. How are everybody doing today? My name is Elliot. As Alex said, one of the pastors here, so good to be with you this morning from the surface of the sun, which will continue to get hotter throughout the week.

But we've got air conditions, so praise God. And we're actually in the middle of a series where we're considering some of the parables of Jesus and what they teach us about kingdom living.

And this week is really kind of part two of last week's sermon because there's this series of parables that Jesus tells in response to kind of a common complaint that the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, had about Jesus eating and drinking with sinners.

And it tells us that Jesus told them three parables. And we looked at two of them last week. One which describes a shepherd who leaves behind 99 sheep to go and find one.

And one that describes a woman who had 10 coins but has lost one. And so she searches the whole house for it. And both of those really show us something about how God pursues those he loves.

[1 : 1 2] But then Jesus tells this third parable, which is maybe one of the most famous parables that he tells, commonly known as the prodigal son.

And though this parable certainly has elements in it that hit the same kind of notes that the other ones do in terms of how God pursues people in his kingdom. I think this parable really is the key to what Jesus is trying to show the Pharisees.

It's both about who God is and who they are. And what he's going to show them, what this parable is really about, I think is nothing short of what the heart of the gospel is itself.

And so let's just get straight into it. We're going to start again in Luke chapter 15, verse 1 to kind of give us the context. And then we're going to jump down to verse 11. So in Luke 15, it says this, Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him.

And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable. And he said, There was a man who had two sons.

[2 : 2 4] And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me. And he divided his property between them. Now not many days later, the young son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country.

And there he squandered his property and reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country. And he began to be in need.

So he went and he hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate.

But no one gave him anything. And when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish with hunger?

I will arise and I'll go to my father and I'll say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

- [3 : 25] And he arose and he came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.
- And the son said to his father, Father, I have sinned against you and heaven and before you. And I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But his father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him.
- And put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again.
- He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now his older brother was in the field. And as he came near or drew near the house, he heard music and dancing.
- And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And they said to him, Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he's received him back safe and sound.
- [4 : 25] But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. But he said, he answered his father, Look, these many years I have served you.
- And I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.
- And he said to him, Son, you are with me always. And all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this brother was dead and is alive.
- He was lost. And now he is found. This is God's word to us. Now I think what's immediately intriguing about this parable for us in our day is both how it's come to be titled over the years and kind of how it traditionally gets taught.
- Because we call this parable the prodigal son. And just to make sure we're all on the same page about what prodigal actually means, because you might have anything in your head, like wayward or something, or something about it really doesn't speak so much about the younger brother's heart as to what he does.
- [5 : 41] The word prodigal simply means recklessly extravagant, having spent everything. And chances are, if you've ever heard a sermon preached on this, it's quite possible the focus of that sermon is the younger brother.
- And indeed, that's not wholly inappropriate, because as we saw last week, just like in the parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep and the woman and her lost coin, this parable, once again, shows in full brilliance the love and pursuit of the Father.
- But what's really interesting about this parable is not how it's the same as the other two, but how it's different. And I think to understand why Jesus lands this set of parables here, you have to go back to the beginning and again, remember who he's talking to.
- So, when the passage opens, Jesus has two sets of people he's talking to. One is, kind of immoral outsiders, like tax collectors and prostitutes, sinners, people who are openly sinning, not following social conventions, they're not accepted by society, and they're kind of lounging around with Jesus to hear what he's got to say.
- And then, there's this other group, which are kind of like moral insiders, right? They're people who, on the outside, look very outstanding. They are doing what is expected of good people to do, doing what is expected of them by society, and then judging everyone and everything based on how good they're doing with that.
- [7 : 18] And so, I don't think it's an accident that Jesus gives them a tale that has not one, but two sons in it.
- And you could probably, you know, the Bible doesn't actually give us a title for this parable, it's just a parable. You could probably even accurately title it the parable of the two sons.

And to really understand what Jesus is trying to get everyone here to see, I think you have to look at both sons. And so, that's what we're going to do today. And as we look at both of them, just like last week, I kind of want you to hold a big idea in your head as we look at these two sons and how they react to the Father's love and invitation.

And that big idea is basically this. The parable of the two sons teaches us that everyone is about the business of trying to secure their own fulfillment and happiness.

But this parable shows us people often go about it in very different ways. So in act one of the parable, we start with the younger son who makes this shocking request.

[8 : 31] He goes to his father and he asks him to give him his share of the estate, his share of the inheritance that would pass to him when his father died right now.

And your initial response to that request is probably the same as the original here. It's like if one of your teenagers came up to you and said, give me my part of the family's money right now, like your response would probably be something like, you are a funny person.

You got funny jokes. Have you lost your mind, kid? And they would have thought the same way. But what's worse than the audacity of the request is what it signals because, again, the estate doesn't pass until the father dies.

And so in effect, what the son is saying, I kind of wish you would just die. Like what he's basically saying is all the father is to him is a means to enjoying the family wealth.

And now he's basically saying, I'm weary of this relationship getting in the way. I want your stuff. And it is intensely disrespectful.

[9 : 49] But what, in this case, what the father does is equally as shocking as the request? He gives it to him. It just simply says he divides his property between them.

And this is probably one of those places where the English translation masks the force of the weight of the word a bit because there's a lot of words in Greek you can use to define like property, like financial property, and that word is not used.

The Greek word here for property is *bios*, which means life. And that's exactly what the father would have had to do to meet this request.

He would have had to tear his life apart. Like he doesn't have all this money like sitting liquid in some bank account. Like he would literally have to go out and start the business of selling ancestral family lands to make this thing happen for his son.

It's crazy. And the younger brother would have had to watch him do this and not bat an eye at it. How could he do that?

[11 : 00] Like how could you watch the pain of what you're causing the father and do that? But if we're honest, the spirit of the younger brother isn't that foreign to us.

Because you see, a younger brother's spirit will seek fulfillment and happiness even if they have to break all the rules. The most important thing is that I'm happy.

Fulfilled. Living my dreams. And frankly, it doesn't matter what social rules or conventions I have to break.

It doesn't matter what authority I have to ignore. And it doesn't really matter who I have to hurt or embarrass along the way because me not being able to live the fullness of life as I think it should be is not an option.

And many, many people seek fulfillment that way in our society. And many, many marriages churches and families and churches and communities suffer for it.

[12 : 12] I don't care who it hurts. I don't feel fulfilled. I don't feel happy. And I'm gonna chase it. And usually the younger brothers themselves suffer for it themselves as well.

And it's no different in this story when the promise of wild living kind of comes crashing down and sin as it often does takes this this man farther than he ever thought he could go and he's at the very very bottom.

He remembers something. Life with the father was actually better. And so he resolves to go home and last week we saw this father's response that again is just as shocking as the request.

He he has every right to turn this son away but instead he immediately restores him. He immediately puts the best back on him and sets about celebrating.

And you know as we've said in many of these parables like this isn't intended to be an instruction manual on all reconciliation. You know like a couple of weeks when Jesse walked us through how we explore kingdom forgiveness like if someone has wounded you there might be words to be said like it might take some time but but the response of the father in this parable is meant to show you something about the heart of God because what you see when the son comes home is that the father is not interested in making him pay.

[13 : 48] He is not interested in I told you so. He's not interested in look who's back with their tail between their legs you're like he's just so happy he's home.

What the father wants most is not to be right what he wants is to be back with his son again. And you could preach a whole sermon just about that.

It is an unforeseen and unexpected restoration. It is a a marvel of grace that ends in a party.

A happy ending. Or so we would hope but sadly there's another son in this story and it would seem that he is equally invested in embarrassing his father.

So in act two of the parable we find another brother the elder brother and we find him doing what is expected of the oldest. He's out getting it done. He's out about his father's business.

[14 : 59] And as he's returning home from his duties he hears this party and so he calls over the servants and he asks what's going on and the servants tell him that your brother has come home and he's safe and sound and we're throwing a party but instead of being excited like the father he is furious and he refuses to go in and make no mistake that would have been equally as embarrassing to publicly make your father leave the party to come out and deal with you.

Like if you're thinking this looks a lot like a stompy feet toddler it looks a lot like a stompy feet toddler. I'm not going in there. And when his father comes out we find out why he's angry because he just unloads on him with both barrels right?

And again mask a little bit in the translation it says look it's literally like his father comes out and he says won't you come in and he says look you I have slaved away all these years.

I've done everything you've asked. I've never embarrassed you. And you had never thrown me a party. Never. And then this son of yours who went out and wasted everything you had on frivolous living sinful things he comes back and you give him the best?

I'm out in the field slaving away making this estate. And so what? Is he just like now a son again? Right? Like guess he gets another share of the inheritance right?

[16 : 36] We're going to chop it up again? Now it's probably worth pausing a moment and addressing kind of a real issue here because if we're honest some of us when we read that story might legitimately be thinking you know I actually think he kind of has a point.

I mean it seems really unfair that he's done everything right and his father never gives him anything. like and now he has to give up even more of what was rightfully his for this brother who spit in his father's face.

And on the surface that might be understandable except when you really look at his response it tells us two things about who this brother really is.

First thing we can see is that he really doesn't have much of a love relationship with his father. And the way you know that is that as a matter of general practice this kind of behavior is not how you handle things with someone you deeply love.

Like it's not what good communication looks like. I mean even if he was hurt this is the kind of thing where if you were going to honor your father you would pull him aside privately later and say you know even though I'm glad my brother's home I gotta say I'm kind of hurt by this.

[18 : 03] Can we talk about this? But he doesn't do that. He forces the issue. He forces it to be about him instead of his brother.

But more than that I think his response tells us something else which is really even worse. Just like the younger brother he doesn't want his father either.

Just like the younger brother he just wants his stuff. because you see while younger brothers will seek fulfillment and happiness even if they have to break all the rules an elder brother spirit will expect fulfillment and happiness precisely because they have kept all the rules.

What he wants is the fattened calf. A party for him. A share of the inheritance and just like his brother he doesn't care if he has to hurt and embarrass his father to get it.

He doesn't want to share in his father's joy. Like he doesn't care that his father is happy that his son is home. And he obviously doesn't care about his brother either because he doesn't want family.

[19 : 25] He doesn't want his father. He wants what he believes he has earned. You know elder brother hearts cause just as much pain as younger brother hearts.

But they're a little trickier and a little harder to spot because on the outside elder brothers might look like they're doing all the right things. But it still shows up in a few ways.

Like if you're wanting to know what it looks like. Good indication that someone might have an elder brother heart is do you resent when God lavishes blessing on someone you don't think has earned it?

I actually saw this show up a lot for many years when I was doing singles ministry right. And again like everybody there struggling through the very real desire to like be married and have a family and you know one of the things that just happens in life is you'd have someone who is living for Jesus and trying to follow them and being honorable in the way they deal with others and then you find someone else who has just been living it up right like they have slept with a lot of people they have you know not been living their life in a God honoring way and then that person gets saved and radically comes to Jesus and God blesses them maybe like with this amazing person in this amazing family that they didn't think possible for how they were living and then there's someone over there who never did any of that and is like really like they get that and I don't.

Another elder brother heart is like if you and this again this happens a lot on on social media if like you are so angry about someone you know not following the things of God that you really are looking forward to them getting theirs right it's that kind of thing that's like well God's gonna show you one day like you'll find out I'm right one day you're gonna get smited smoke like and you're you're kind of looking forward to that even though the Bible tells us God doesn't God is just he will act but he doesn't take joy in the death of even the wicked or maybe it bothers you when someone who doesn't have their act together is drawing close to God you know like it's easy to look at this and and kind of snub our noses at the Pharisees like it's easy to talk about how Jesus draws in the lost and the tax collectors and sinners but you do have to ask yourself how uncomfortable are you if people like that actually show up in church like are you worried about what people will think if they see you with them out and about town when everybody knows what they're about like but Jesus told us last week you know like the sick the healthy don't need a doctor the sick do and so if a church really is a hospital you got to expect it's gonna get a little messy from time to time because people come in with serious wounds but you know the beautiful thing here and man I am so thankful for this is God doesn't have a different heart for the older brother maybe to put it another way

[22 : 49] Jesus is not a Pharisee about Pharisees he reaches out to the stubbornly self-righteous as well and so the father because he loves this son too again does the unthinkable he had every right to say all right well if you don't want to come in he stops what he's doing and he goes out to meet him and he pleads with him please it's right and fitting come back inside and then the story just ends like we don't know what happens next like we don't know the conclusion does the brother come inside and be reunited with the family or does he just stay on the outside these these two sons I think in a lot of ways represent the two main ways that people try to seek and save themselves the ways that people try to find fulfillment and happiness and they've been doing it since the beginning of time and and they not so subtly mirror the two groups that Jesus is talking to and again that's interesting because on the outside you you couldn't get two totally different groups they're doing opposite things with their lives one set is breaking all the rules to get what they think they want and need and and one set is keeping all the rules but Jesus says neither of you are seeking the father now there is an interesting twist here though because while both paths alienate you from God you you could probably say here the the way of moral conformity like trying to get

God to accept you by doing all the right things might actually be the more dangerous of the two and we know this because in the story while while the younger brother is redeemed and welcome back in the family we don't we don't actually know what the older brother's fate is and I think that's a literary device that Jesus is using this parable to just get you to think seriously about it if you've ever tried to reach anyone with the gospel like you actually come to understand that that sometimes the people you think would be easy to reach aren't and sometimes the people you think would be hard to reach are the ones who want to come the most like like if you were if I were to say to you who do you think is going to be the hardest person to tell about Jesus if you were kind of uninitiated you might think like maybe it's someone in jail or someone who just got out of jail but like if you've ever talked to someone like that you would find out a lot of the times it's actually really easy to talk about Jesus because they're under no illusion that they're good like they know they've messed it up

Jesus is actually kind of saying that while a life of license a life of recklessness may be more easily identifiable as destructive a life of legalism might actually be worse because it's easy to fall into this trap that you're accepted because you've made good decisions in life the gospel is so radically different from those worldly ways of justifying ourselves of seeking our own fulfillment that frankly it's it's kind of like it's from another world like it it doesn't really resonate us with us in his book the prodigal God I think Tim Keller does about as good a job I've seen as trying to get at this reality so just take it away Tim and he says Jesus does not divide the world into the moral good guys and the immoral bad guys he shows us that everyone is dedicated to a project of self-salvation to using

God and others in order to get power and control for themselves we're just going about it in different ways now even though both sons are wrong however the father cares for them and invites them both back into his love and feast and this means that Jesus message which is the gospel is completely different kind of spirituality the gospel of Jesus is not religion or irreligion morality or immorality moralism or relativism conservatism or liberalism nor is it something halfway along a spectrum between those two poles it's something else altogether the gospel is distinct from two approaches in its view everyone is wrong everyone is loved and everyone is called to recognize that and change by contrast elder brothers divide the world in two the good people like us are in and the bad people who are the real problem with the world are out and younger brothers even if they don't believe in

God at all do the same thing saying no the open-minded and tolerant people are in and the bigoted narrow-minded people who are the real problem in the world are out but Jesus says the humble are in and the proud are out Jesus is going to go on to make this same point about humility being the door into the kingdom in other parables the the people who try to justify themselves don't enter in and the ones who humbly cry have mercy on me a sinner find the king and I think one of the reasons this this is so hard for us to accept and honestly why there's probably some part of us that whether we know it or not still kind of gets offended as the gospel is because depending on how you're wired when you hear that you immediately begin to think of all the places and ways of thinking in in society where your way of thinking is more helpful but don't don't confuse this with some pragmatic application like like some practical use some regardless whether you are if you typically have kind of a younger brother's heart if you lean towards that I'm sure you could admit there are places in society where it's good like it's good that the speed limit isn't whatever anybody thinks it should be right like that's not a scenario that leads to flourishing on the road right and even if you're the the strongest moral conformist like the most goody two-shoes person in here right like you cross every t and dot every i i would almost bet that at some point you have experienced some kind of overly legalistic critique of how you dress or what music you like or just something else where somebody stood in judgment of your relationship with Jesus based solely on some factor that they thought was the most important it's not what we're talking about Jesus isn't teaching a course on rules for wise discernment and living or ordering society what he's saying is stop trying to be your own god stop trying to secure for yourselves with your own hands and your own devices what only me and my father and my spirit can do for you and the stakes of getting the gospel writer are really high because you know if any part of you hears that and you're like the way into the kingdom is humility through Jesus and if any part of you says well yeah but if any part of you thinks that that God should accept you because you're good then the problem is that means Jesus might be your helper he might be your example and he might be your inspiration but he is not your savior I mean how could he be you're filling that role you're filling that spot in your life Jesus is the savior we need and more than that he's actually the true elder brother like he's the brother that you kind of wish was in this story the brother that when when a debt had to be paid to cover the sinfulness of another brother didn't stomp around outside when his father came to him and said will you pay it he says yes I'll pay it whatever it takes to get my brother back you know when Tim Keller named that book the prodigal God uh again at first glance it

[31 : 59] doesn't seem to fit right like what does that even mean like because we connect it with with that younger brother but let's take a quick peek back at that definition of prodigal again really kind of is the parable of the prodigal god the one who is recklessly extravagant in how he pursues the one who has spent everything to invite us into the kingdom who loves younger brothers who spit in his face and openly sin who invites back in self-righteous older brothers who think they deserve his love god is the one who pursues that one sheep who's wandered away he is the one who will search the whole house with desperation for the one coin that is lost he's the one that receives the wandering child home and he's the one that invites the stubborn self-righteous child to just lay down their anger and come on into the party recklessly extravagant as the band comes up a couple of ways you can respond if you're not a follower of Jesus you don't have to be a believer to see that that those kind of ways like self-expression moral conformity like they're common ways people are trying to find meaning and purpose and happiness and honestly the tension and conflict between those mirrors so much of our philosophic and legal and political thought like it's it's easy to see it but I think it's also easy to see by itself none of it's going to bring you what you seek you're not going to find happiness at the end of that road and what Jesus is trying to say is it doesn't cost anything but it does take a humble heart that says

I want to be close to the father you don't you don't have any leverage in that deal with God like you don't have anything to offer him but God says if you're thirsty you can drink from that well like if you if you want to know where real life is you can find it there'll be a prayer on the screen that's a way that maybe you express want to express that or you can just again you can ask that right in your seat you can say God you know I'm empty I don't know about anything else here but I know what I'm doing is not making me happy if you are a follower of Jesus just a little reminder seek the father not the blessings the father will give and if you've wandered away because you think you need to to find happiness just come back he's still there he's waiting if you're stubbornly standing in the corner demanding that God give you better things because you've done better just give that up you know when the father says everything I have is yours to the younger son like man again you could impact that in so many ways but you know and almost it's almost like he's saying you know what you had to do was ask there is nothing I wouldn't give you we got that same God today so just take a moment and commune with your father because that's what he really wants and then when you're ready we go to the communion table if you're a follower of Jesus and again it's it's just a time to remember that that you do you do have a big brother a firstborn but he was willing to pay all of it there was there was no price including himself that was too high for you to be back with the father so if there's any part of you that's ever ever tempted to wonder like am I really in communion testifies to you you can never not be in because that's how much his body and his blood means so take that enjoy that you get to be a part of the family a part of the inheritance father we we give this moment to you

I pray that God through all the the things in our heart and the foolish ways we seek that you will just touch our hearts today somehow pierce through both the younger the younger brother hearts in here that that really feel like they've got to run from all responsibility run from all the the obligations to find happiness that you would reach the older brother hearts that are angry that that they don't have what they believe they deserve that don't understand that you just pierce through all that and show them that your whole kingdom is before them there is nothing off limits to a child of the kingdom Holy Spirit have your way in Jesus name who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew who knew