

## The Heart of the Matter 3-6-16

Lord Jesus, cause us to grow more & more like You! Change our hearts when we get into selfish, self-centered mode. We are powerless as we cry out to You. We rejoice knowing that You are our strength & salvation! Amen.

A Sunday school teacher was teaching the parable of the Prodigal Son. Of course she'd talked about both of the sons – one who took his money & spent it foolishly & came home; the other who had stayed home the whole time & did the right thing.

She asked the class, “Who was really sad the prodigal son came home?” After thinking about it, a little boy said, "The fatted calf."

This story that Jesus told is most often called The Parable of the Prodigal Son. That's not what Jesus called it. Jesus began by saying, “There was a man who had 2 sons...” The story is the 3<sup>rd</sup> in a series of parables about things lost. The 1<sup>st</sup> is the lost sheep. A man who had 100 sheep loses one, leaves the 99 to search for the lost one, & rejoices when he finds it. He calls his neighbors & wants them to celebrate w/him. The point Jesus makes is “there is more joy in heaven over one who repents than over 99 who need no repentance.” The 2<sup>nd</sup> story is similar – a woman loses a coin, finds it, rejoices w/her friends. Jesus says, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Then Jesus begins the 3<sup>rd</sup> story, the story of a man who had 2 sons – one of whom becomes lost & is found! There is great joy in this story also – the story of a man who turns from rebellious living & comes back to his

father. The father is overjoyed; the brother? Not so much. Jesus tells all 3 of these stories in response to the scribes & Pharisees who are murmuring against Him saying, **“This man receives sinners & eats w/ them.”**

The scribes & Pharisees, the religious leaders, **did** everything right – or at least went to great lengths to try to LOOK like they did everything right. There was little joy in their lives – they were unhappy people. They were TOO good to associate w/sinners. They were obsessed w/the law. Their hearts were hard.

Now to our story of the man who had 2 sons. The younger son took his part of his father’s goods – his inheritance - packed up, & went to a far country. He wasted all of his money in reckless & foolish living. Famine hits. He gets a job feeding pigs – not exactly a prime job for a Jewish boy. But it’s while he’s doing this job that he **comes to his senses**. It is significant that NO ONE gives him anything – in other words, no one takes care of him, no one feels sorry for him, no one enables him to continue living comfortably. He has to **face** the result of his choices – his **poor** choices. He wakes up. He realizes his father’s servants have it much better than he does. He heads home.

Along the way, the younger son rehearses his speech. “Father, I have sinned against heaven & b/4 you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.” As he is approaching home, his father saw him & ran to him –

hugged him & kissed him – calls for the finest robe, kills the fatted calf, & has a party!

**His son who had been lost has been found!** A **sinner who was dead in his sin has turned** – has repented! Joy to the max!

The father's acceptance of his son is certainly a picture of **unconditional** love. The story is an encouragement to all of us – it doesn't matter where we have been, where we are, when we turn our hearts toward home, our Father is already on the watch. He sees us, runs to us, welcomes us home! What joy! It is totally undeserved – it is the grace of God. His mercy never comes to an end! Great is His faithfulness to us! We say as the Psalmist said, **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."** Or as Isaiah said, "Behold, God is my salvation. I will trust & not be afraid. For the Lord my God is my strength & my song. He also has become my salvation!" Joy!

But, alas, there's the other son. This son has done all the right things. He has never left his father's house; he would **never** waste his money on foolish things or loose living. When he is told his brother has returned & his father is having a grand party for him, he is angry & will NOT go in to the party. When his father comes out to plead w/him to join in the celebration, he says, "these many years I have been serving you; I have never transgressed your commandment at any time; & yet you never gave me a young goat that I might make merry w/my friends." I, I, I... He goes on to say, "But as soon as **this son of yours** came.." Notice, he couldn't even say, "But as soon

as my brother came...” He can’t call him “brother.” “But as soon as this son of yours came, who devoured your livelihood w/harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.”

There’s no joy in this man even though his brother who was dead is alive again. Lots of pain & envy.

It makes one wonder – did the Pharisees get it? Did they realize they were just as bad off as the elder son? Doing everything right, no joy, obsessed with fairness – did they realize they were missing something?

Lee Griess, in “Taking The Risk Out Of Dying,” says, “Let me tell you a true story. Back in 1893 there were a group of four sisters. The Cherry Sisters they called themselves, who made their stage debut in Cedar Rapids in a skit they wrote themselves. For three years, the Cherry Sisters performed to packed theaters throughout the Midwest. People came to see them to find out if they were as bad as they had heard. Their **unbelievably atrocious acting** enraged critics and provoked the audience to throw vegetables at the would-be actresses. Wisely, the sisters thought it best to travel with an **iron screen** which they would erect in front of the stage in self-defense.

Amazingly, in 1896 the girls were offered a thousand dollars a week to perform on Broadway -- not because they were so good, but because they were so unbelievably bad. Seven years later, after the Cherry Sisters had earned what in that day was a respectable fortune of \$200,000, they retired from the stage for the peaceful life back on the farm. Oddly enough, these successful Broadway "stars" remained convinced to the end that they were truly the most talented actresses ever to grace the American stage. They never had a clue as to how bad they truly were!

The parable this morning does not tell us what the elder brother did when his father came out to speak to him. It doesn't reveal to us whether he realized that his envy and disdain had made him **just as bad as** his younger brother. Yes, the elder brother had never stooped to find himself in the pignens of life. He would never have been caught dead carousing with prostitutes or wasting his resources in riotous living but in the end his refusal to rejoice at the return of his sinful brother was, to Jesus, just as offensive.

The tragedy was that he never realized just how bad HE truly was!”

It would be interesting at this point for us to sit in a circle & take turns saying where we see ourselves in this parable. Are you living in rebellion, doing your own thing like the younger son? Probably not as overtly – we’ve most likely all been there – off in a far country looking for life in the wrong places, & if we are really honest, we still like our selfish living. Or are we like the older son who has been doing the right thing, but **resenting** it. Do we have a hard time rejoicing w/ sinners who repent? Do we think we deserve the goodness of God because we’re so nice? Are we all about what is **fair**? That’s scary! Do we make the mistake of qualifying sin? Like one sin is worse than another? We may lust, but we **don’t** commit adultery! We may say, “You fool!” But we **don’t** murder. Remember Jesus said they are the same. Yes, the consequences of adultery and murder are more severe, but when we are in to lust, greed, envy... our hearts are far from God. All sin separates us from God! As we confess our sin, as we cry out to Him – “Change my heart, O God! I can’t do it by myself! I’m stuck in this!” God hears; God comes to our aid. What mercy!

The truth is none of us deserve one iota of God’s mercy & grace – yet, He lavishes it upon us when we turn to Him. There’s joy in heaven! He’s preparing a party! He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. There is NO room for pride! Jesus paid it all! In Christ we’re all new creations! He does NOT hold our sin against us. God has reconciled us to Himself

thru Jesus Christ taking our sin upon Himself. We didn't **do everything right** & earn God's favor! It is a pure gift!

As you come to the table today, may you know again the sweet joy of being reconciled to God through our beloved Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. A.Mim