

Parables of Jesus

Message 8

How Much Are Others Worth to You?

Luke 15:11-32

Introduction

Generational transitions are always hard. I remember, barely, as a small child when a lawyer friend came to our house to meet with my father, grandfather and aunt. I wasn't involved in the discussions, but I knew they were there to make arrangements for the inheritance of my grandfather's farm upon his death. My family are all Christians and get along pretty well, so this was not a rancorous event, but it certainly was sobering. The reason for making those arrangements was the likelihood of my grandfather's death someday! Happily he lived for over 30 years after that, and in the past decade it has been my father who has worried about passing on the farm when he dies. Again, this has not been an issue with my brothers, but the seriousness of the decision has weighed on my father. Even in the best of circumstances, passing on the family inheritance is an emotional experience.

The Prodigal Son

The Parable of the Prodigal Son opens abruptly with the younger of two sons asking his father for his share of the inheritance. Now I don't know about you, but I have never thought to ask my father for my portion of the inheritance. For one thing, he is using it! The farm is still being worked by my father and my brothers. And besides, an inheritance is something you receive after your parents die. Trying to get your parents' money before they die is rude, to say the least. It gives the impression that you care more about their money and possessions than about your parents. But here we have the younger son brazenly demanding his share of his father's inheritance. This must have come as a great shock to the father, and I am sure it was with great sorrow that he reviewed his accounts and determined how much should go to this son.

Then to add insult to injury, in a few days the younger son packed up everything he owned and left town. And not only did he leave town – he left the country! His attitude appears to have been like some college students – get far away from home so you can live it up without your parents prying into your activities. And live it up he did. Apparently his father had some wealth, for there were servants in the household. So I guess the son had a lot of money to spend, but eventually it was all gone. So what kind of person is this younger son? What profile can we draw of him based on this parable so far? He seems to have few positive personal characteristics. He was selfish, lazy, and hedonistic. He apparently did no work and had no positive interest, for the text tells us that he “wasted his possessions with prodigal living”.

It is as if your father wrote you a check for \$160,000 to cover the cost of four years at Lehigh, but instead you went to the Riviera where you bought a Masarati, rented a plush condo on the Mediterranean, found a few beautiful girls or handsome guys to share it, leased a yacht, and dined in four-star restaurants. What a life! A fast car, beautiful girls, a boat, great food – what could be better! You could live like this forever. Except, that in a year the money runs out. Then what? Several large individuals come to take your condo, car, and boat to satisfy your unpaid bills at the marina and the restaurants around town. Now your credit cards are maxed out and you don't even have the cash to buy a plane ticket back to the States. It's gone. Every drop of your fortune is gone– and it's never coming back! Later in the day hunger begins to set in, but your wallet is empty. Fortunately the weather on the Riviera is pleasant, so you will not freeze at night. But after several days of hunger and nights sleeping in a park, you begin to realize that you will starve to death. Eventually you see that you will have to work to get money for food. What a revolting development! Work! How awful! You are accustomed to letting others do your work. You have never worked for them in your life. It is humiliating, degrading – but your life depends on it. But you are thinking, “I would

never get into such a pitiful situation.” And why not? Why would you never get into such a plight? Because you have at least enough sense to keep track of your money. Now we see a final characteristic of the younger son – he was foolish, very foolish.

The parable goes on to describe the calamity that soon beset the far country. A severe famine hit the land. I doubt that you have never known a severe famine. The United States is blessed with enormous agricultural capacity, and modern transportation enables us to provide food anywhere in the world where there is a need. But famines do still exist, largely caused by wars. Millions have died from starvation and malnutrition in Africa in this century, usually because war prevents the delivery of food. The worst that you have personally experienced, I suppose, is a drought. A few summers ago we had water restrictions in Bethlehem due to the drought. It was a pain. We could not water the grass with automatic sprinklers, and our family really suffered! A shrub that a friend gave us died in the course of the summer. But we never lacked water to drink or food to eat. A famine, however, is a very serious matter, because people do die. Now the younger son was in real trouble, Losing all his money and possessions was traumatic enough, but now he was faced with a slow, painful death.

Fortunately, he was able to find a job. Have you ever taken care of pigs? Of all the animals man has domesticated, pigs are the dirtiest and smelliest. When I was growing up, I did not mind too much cleaning out the cow barns but the pig pens were rank. And the smell doesn't come off, either. It's a good thing I never cared to date when I was working on the farm! So this was a very low-class job. Furthermore, apparently it paid very little. The text says he longed to eat the pods that he was feeding the pigs. Now pigs eat garbage and waste matter such as bean pods – worthless stuff – yet the son did not have enough money even to buy pig food. Even with the only job he could find, the son was still starving to death.

At last the son had an intelligent thought. He realized that his father's servants had good food. Now, almost crazed with hunger and barely strong enough to make the trip, he travels the long distance back home. The bright, young dandy who left so gaily now returns half-dead, a pathetic pauper.

The Compassionate Father

Now put yourself in the place of the father. How would you have felt all this time? Think about it. You worked all your life building up the family farm or business. You rose early and worked late. You labored under the hot sun and diligently kept your books. Year by year, decade by decade you worked to maintain your estate, also raising two fine young men. How would you have responded to the younger son who asked for his inheritance? Would you have been shocked and dismayed to see that all the effort you put into him has resulted in a worthless bum? How would you have felt about liquidating a major part of your life's work and watching it walk down the road? What would you have done in the long nights thereafter? Half of your farm is gone, sold to give your son his inheritance, and his place at the table is empty now. Would you be sorrowful that he left? Or would you be angry that he stripped you of part of your life? Would you be ashamed? Think of what the community is saying. “Sam is a good man, but he really failed with that younger son of his. It's too bad. Sam spoiled him, and now look. That boy has ruined his life.” Imagine what conversation goes on in the neighboring houses. “Jack, go do your homework. You don't want to waste your life like Sam's son did, do you?” You have become the standard by which everyone compares their own families – the standard of failure, that is. I think that most people would experience a combination of these responses – grief, anger, and humiliation.

So what would you do when you saw your foolish son walk through the door? Would you hug him? Or yell at him? Again I think many of us would do both! But look at the father. In spite of the terrible disgrace this son has been to him he gives him an unqualified welcome! Welcome seems too weak a word.

He receives his son with enthusiasm and joy. Immediately he orders his servants to throw a big party to celebrate. You know, this looks more like a hero's welcome than the return of the family disgrace. But notice that the father did not wait to receive the son in his library. He saw him while he was still a long way off. I am sure the clothes were unrecognizable, but I guess the father recognized the son's figure, or perhaps his gait. Then he did something astonishing. He ran to greet his son. Running is not very dignified, and men in that culture did not customarily run, but the father ran to meet his son.

Now why did the father run to greet his son, and hug him, and order the feast? The text tells us. He had compassion on him. Compassion is a word compounded of two Latin words: "com" meaning with, and "passion" meaning suffer. Compassion is that character trait of being able to join someone in his or her sufferings. It is a deep, profound understanding of his distress. It is an understanding that would come from having experienced the same grief yourself. When the father looked out and saw his son staggering up the road he did not become angry or embarrassed, because he could understand the sorrow of his son. His heart went out to the poor, foolish young man, and he loved him.

Don't you wish you had a father like this? Maybe your father is. If so, you are very fortunate. I am sorry to say that sometimes even the best of fathers lose their perspective. They get wrapped up in the business of life and forget what their children are going through. This father is clearly a gem. He does not excuse or condone what has happened. In fact, at the end of the parable it becomes clear that he has no intention of replacing what the son lost. The younger son will remain poor all his life, unless he works hard and builds up his own business. But even then he is working at a big disadvantage, not having his father's inheritance to start with. This father is no softie. He is far different from the attitude so prevalent today – whatever my children want is fine with me as long as they are happy. No. There are things which you may want which are wrong. They are not OK. If you do them, there will be negative consequences. But in spite of this, and through all his son's struggles, the father still loves him. Perhaps the father did foolish things himself when he was young. Perhaps *his* father also forgave *him* for stupid things he did in his youth. But however he got it, he understands his son and has compassion on him. Isn't that wonderful?

Now when we ask for the meaning of this parable, several things become apparent immediately. It seems obvious that the father stands for God, who is called our Father elsewhere in the gospels – and the younger son would be that which was lost, like the sheep and the coin. So the lesson of the parable is that God loves his people, even when they stray. Like the shepherd with his sheep and the woman with her coins, the father seeks diligently for his lost son. In fact, as we mentioned in passing, the father is pictured, not busily engaged in the work of his business, but looking out toward the far country, longing for the son whom he has lost to return. In this way we have a striking picture of God, who never forgets us and always is looking for us even when we stray. God's love is greater than all our sins. Even if we should do terrible, humiliating things, God still looks for us, welcomes us, and loves us when we return.

The Necessity of Return

But there has to be a return. Some people would have you believe that we all can experience God's love and forgiveness regardless of how we live. Surely the father in the parable had love and compassion on his son before he returned, but it did the son no good until he came home. If compassion was the operative motivation in the father, then repentance was the operative motivation in the son. Look at his words. He did not say, "Gosh, I have made a big mistake. I will admit this to Dad, and perhaps he will let me start over." No! There is no starting over, and there is no mistake. The son spoke the truth. He said. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." The son realized that he has acted shamefully. It is true that he is no longer worthy to be his father's son. He realized that it is not even clear whether he is qualified to be his father's servant.

He has behaved despicably, and deserves nothing. But it is this state of repentance which enables him to return home – to his father's love.

We also can experience the wonderful, compassionate love of our heavenly Father, but only if we turn to Him in repentance. Is this how you come to God? Do you understand how awful your sin is, or do you try to mask it by thinking of your sins as mistakes? Do you see how foolish you are to sin? Do you see that you have squandered the precious resources that God has given you by continuing to sin? Do you see that you also, like the younger son, are an embarrassment to your Father? Do you understand that you do not deserve to be called a Christian? When you pray, do you say, “Lord, I have sinned against you and am not worthy to be called your son. Please take me for your servant.” If you are not secure in the precious love of our heavenly Father, perhaps it is because you have not returned home. Perhaps you are still wallowing in the pigsty of sin. If that is the case with you, do not let the night pass without returning to your heavenly Father. Why should you go through life hungry and homeless when God is waiting to welcome you home?

The Dutiful Son

But there is one important element missing in this parable. In the other two parables there was a searcher – one who left the safety of home and went out into the wilderness looking for the lost sheep. In this parable no one went looking for the lost son. Is this a simple omission? Did Jesus wish to focus our attention on the Father's love and therefore leave out a search party? No. In this parable there *is* someone to go out and find the lost son, but he never went. Who is the other character? It is the older son.

At first glance the older son appears to be a model citizen. He is hard-working and unswervingly faithful. All the while the younger son has been partying and throwing away his money, the older son has been toiling in the fields and building the estate. The younger son brought shame to his father, but the older son has made him proud. No doubt the father was relieved and pleased that one of his sons, at least, turned out well. Here was a fine young man to whom he could entrust the fruit of his labor, and who would handle it well.

But this is only half of the story. When his younger brother returns, the older son's true character becomes apparent. Now we see that his hard labor and faithful service all these years has not been out of love and devotion for his father, but was in his own interest. As the story moves to its climax we see the older brother is in reality a selfish, proud, greedy, and angry young man. Earlier we noted the callous selfishness of the younger brother in demanding his inheritance early, but now we can see that the older brother is just as greedy. He is just more patient and calculating. Furthermore, his anger must have been motivated in part by the humiliation he has suffered all this time by being related to his foolish sibling. He was probably glad to see him go so that he would no longer be an embarrassment to the family – and to him in particular. So when the younger brother returns, it is not a cause for rejoicing – quite the opposite. The older brother is deeply frustrated and angry.

How do you feel about your younger brother or sister? Would you help him if he was in trouble? This was the situation that triggered the plot in the cheap adventure movie, *Romancing the Stone*. It's not a great movie, although Danny DeVito is really funny and there is plenty of action. But the characters are poor role models. The heroine writes trashy novels and the hero is a college drop-out. They smoke pot and fornicate while running from the bad guys. But even these immoral characters recognize a profound universal truth – when your sister is in trouble, you go to the rescue. Joan Wilder doesn't stew about whether her sister was foolish to go to Columbia in the first place, or whether she made good decisions. And even though Joan has no experience in the jungle and no skills to fight terrorists, she knows that she must go rescue her sister – because it's the right thing to do.

How about you? Would you plunge into danger to rescue your brother or sister if he or she needed you? A few summers back Ruth led a women's Bible study using Doug Wilson's book, *Future Men*, about rearing boys. Early in the book he tells a charming story about a young lad who showed up in Teddy Roosevelt's Sunday School class with a black eye. It turned out that a big kid was pinching his sister, so he fought him. Roosevelt was so pleased, he gave the little guy a dollar as a reward – to the dismay of the church leaders. But Roosevelt recognized that although we don't want our boys out fighting all the time, fighting in defense of your sister is a noble thing to do.

In our parable today the younger brother was not in physical danger so much as in spiritual danger. Not only had he left home, but we can see from the pigs that he had left Israel as well. Clearly he went to a pagan land so he could sin more freely. Are you concerned about the welfare of your brothers and sister? Do you exert yourself to help them spiritually? Do you warn them of the dangers of sin? Do you encourage them to pursue godly activities? Or are you so selfish you just ignore them?

This parable is in many ways the story of God's people all through history. In the beginning Cain refused to care for his brother. He even killed him. Noah's sons had trouble getting along, as did Abraham's and Isaac's. One of the most heart-wrenching chapters in all of scripture is the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was a little smart-alec. He was Jacob's favorite son, so he got all kinds of special privileges. Then he had these dreams in which all the rest of his family bowed down and worshiped him – and he had the nerve to tell everybody these dreams! He was a genuine pain in the rear. Finally his brothers got an opportunity to give him what he deserved. Alone in the fields far away from home, they seized him, and under the leadership of his older brother Judah, they sold him as a slave. At last there was peace in the family. The little rat was gone!

The True Older Brother

It's against this background that we read in Hebrews that Jesus is our older brother. When He became man, Jesus became the brother of us all. And although we are irritating, foolish, and wicked He is not ashamed of us! You see, Jesus is the true older brother who does what all older brothers are supposed to do. When we were hopelessly lost in our sins, He came to rescue us. We didn't deserve it. We squandered our inheritance through our own foolishness and wickedness. But that didn't stop Jesus. He could have let us suffer for our own sins, but no – He came to the rescue. And what a rescue it was! The only way to save us was to die Himself in our place. So Jesus willingly stepped forward to die for our sins.

Hebrews teaches us that Jesus is the true older brother. He is the model for all older brothers. Coming back to our parable, now we can see that the older son should have left home to look for his brother. The older son was supposed to be the seeker – but he refused. Like Cain and Judah, he allowed hatred to rule his life.

Did you notice why Jesus told these parables? Do you remember who He told them to? These three parables about the lost – the sheep, the coin, and the son – all were told to the Pharisees because they were upset with Jesus for eating and mingling with the sinners and tax collectors. They hated the sinners and tax collectors. Sinners and tax collectors were the scum of the earth, a blot on the nation, a pollutant in the community, an embarrassment to all decent people. The Pharisees thought Jesus was wasting His time with such rabble. So now do you get the point? Jesus has come as the true shepherd, the true older brother because the resident shepherds and older brothers had turned on their siblings. The Pharisees should have been out looking for the lost, out ministering to the sinners and tax collectors, but instead they avoided or attacked them. The Pharisees were irritated, embarrassed, and angry that such a great rabbi as Jesus should mingle with the rabble, and they couldn't contain their discomfort. Jesus told this parable to wake them up,

to open their eyes, to show them how miserably they had failed and to call them to repentance.

Which Brother are You?

Where do you fit into this story? Are you the prodigal? Have you, either physically or mentally left home to pursue pleasure? Are you living in a spiritually strange land, indulging your lusts? Are you feeding the pigs of sin in your life? If so, the message for you is that your heavenly Father will never reject you if you return home. Now you are in great danger. You will soon starve to death in the land of sin, but there is food in abundance in your Father's house. Don't be stupid. Don't stubbornly cling to the worthless trash in your pig-stye. God loves you and has a great party ready to welcome you back home!

But maybe you have not strayed from God. Perhaps you have faithfully done all He has commanded you. If so, then you are an older brother – and the question for you is, what kind of an older brother are you? Are you like Cain and Judah? Do the drug users and sexually active guys and women who abort their babies and the poor and dirty and drunken annoy and anger you? Do you hope and long for clean, respectable, pleasant people to come to RUF, and for the difficult and obnoxious people to stay away? Or is it your blood brothers and sisters, those who live in your own house whom you cannot stand? Do you wish they would disappear and you could spend your time with really cool kids – like yourself? Are you an older brother like Christ, who left His safe, wonderful home to seek the lost, hurting, and disgraced and bring them back home? Perhaps you also need to repent of your wicked heart.

Folks, you simply cannot leave here tonight and keep living the same way you came in. You must turn from your sinful ways and embrace your loving Father. Pray now for God to deliver you from lust for sex, popularity, wealth, and other pleasures. Pray for God to deliver you from a hard heart which resents sinners. Return to your loving Father and go out into the world with your wonderful Older Brother. Pray for God to use you to seek the lost wherever they may be found – at Lehigh or around the world. And in so doing may you know the peace and joy that comes from following Jesus.

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