

GOD LOVES YOU UNCONDITIONALLY

BIBLE READING - Luke's Gospel chapter 15 verses 11 to 32

This passage is commonly known as 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son'.

'Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."'"

²⁰ "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

²² "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

²⁸ “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

SERMON

Let us pray

Father God, as we explore your Holy Scriptures together, and look at a passage that has become so familiar to many of us, we pray that you will open up our eyes to new truths, because today we want you to teach us something more about the awesome and amazing love you have for us, your people, and indeed for ALL people. In Jesus’ Name we pray **AMEN!**

We have had some hard teaching in recent months haven’t we, and it came as no surprise to me that I felt God tell me this month to remind us all of His great and amazing love for every one of us. He has a way of life He wants us to lead, and it is a difficult one if we try to lead it in the flesh, but He wants us to try harder to be like Him because He knows this is what will bring us a real peace and joy. So like any good Father He rebukes and disciplines us and we have been looking at some of those things over recent months. But today I believe God wants to reassure and remind us that His love for us is total, unconditional and way and beyond any kind of love one human being can have for another.

I don’t know about you but when I consider how pure, all powerful and how Holy God is, I often find it hard to believe that He would love me – a sinner, saved by grace.

Well it’s true – If you take nothing else away from today I can tell you over and over - the truth of God’s Word is that God **loves** you and me, and everyone on this planet equally.

He always has and He always will. It is completely impossible for God NOT to love you, and if you hear a voice in your mind telling you the contrary, it is a lie and it is the voice of Satan or one of his demons.

God has never NOT loved you and He never will NOT love you. OK?

In case you need to hear it again God loves you and what's more He loves us more than we can ever understand, this side of the grave!

God is the only perfect Father and a perfect father can only LOVE His children.

I am deliberately emphasising and repeating this fact because I believe there will be people here today who have struggled with this, perhaps for much of their life. If that is you, God wants to set you free today. God has made the ultimate sacrifice for you and me; our part is simply to believe and receive His gift of peace, joy and eternal life in Him.

Irrespective of whether your own biological father has loved you or not loved you, Father God is not like a human father, no matter how your own father might have behaved towards you, Father God can only *love* you. The Bible says, in 1 John 4, 'God **IS** love'.

PAUSE

We talked a lot about sin in recent months and God does hate sin **but** it's the sin he hates, **not** the person struggling with it. He loves each of us so much that He wants to help us, and show us the way not to sin, so our lives can be much more peaceful and joyful.

PAUSE

That's my introduction! Now....

.... what do we see in the Scripture passage today?

Well first let me say I am going to talk solely about verses 11 to 24 of this passage in Luke's Gospel and that is because I want to focus on the part of the parable that tells us about God's love.

If I was to focus on just one key point about this Scripture here in Luke's Gospel it is this:

God's love for all mankind is so deep, so awesome and totally unconditional, in that he even and especially loves to forgive those who repent of their sin - something we talked about at length in February and March.

Interestingly, just before this parable, in verses 7 and 10 (which we didn't read) Jesus confirms this truth TWICE as He tells his listeners ***“There is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God, than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!”***

Now, back to the parable of the Prodigal Son - may I first reassure you that all scholars agree that in this passage the father Jesus refers to is not an earthly father but specifically Father God.

And looking at these Scriptures, I see five characteristics about our amazing God:

First, Irrespective of how selfish we are - God loves us!

Second, Irrespective of how sinful we are - God loves us!

Third, God will go to extraordinary lengths to show us His love.

Fourth - When we repent, He restores us in an extraordinary way.

And my fifth point is that our God loves to rejoice with a party!

Let me ask you - are you struggling with any of those five truths?

I did for years. Let me show you that these five points really are truths - because God's Word does not lie.

Let's start with verse 11 – what does that say?

‘To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons....

What does it mean ‘To illustrate this point further?’ What point???

Well it always helps to set the context, and what we find in the earlier part of Luke's chapter, is that Pharisees and teachers of religious law were complaining that Jesus was associating with sinful people—even eating with them! The Pharisees had contempt for sinful people but Jesus did not. The Pharisees didn't believe the Messiah would associate with sinners! How wrong they were.

So Jesus told these leaders two parables about 'The Lost sheep' and 'The Lost Coin'.

In both cases the point He was making to these leaders (who He often referred to as hypocrites) was how much rejoicing there is in Heaven when a sinner repents.

So now (In verse 11) to illustrate the point further, He tells them the parable of the Prodigal Son to reinforce His teaching that God shows His love to all people including the **unrighteous**, but especially to sinners **who repent!**

Moving on then, here is verse 12:

'The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.'

In the Jewish culture of the time, we see in Deuteronomy chapter 21 that if there were two sons, then when the father died, the first-born inherited two thirds of his father's wealth, and the younger son, one third.

To ask your father for your inheritance before his death was insulting. It was like saying 'I wish you were dead, give me a third of your wealth now.'

Apparently this son could have been stoned to death for treating his father in such a wicked and disrespectful way.

In that culture, no earthly father would have granted his son this request. The parable is a picture of the father showing totally unconditional love – the love that only God has for you and me.

Hence my first point is this: Irrespective of how selfish we are, God still loves us.

Now let's look at verse 13.

"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. "

There is an indication that this young man may well have been a Godly Jewish man but clearly Jesus is describing someone who still likes the temptations and attractions that the world offers.

There are times when I can get drawn back to worldly things – maybe you can too? But we are about to be reminded of the consequences of following the ways of the world.

In verses 14 to 16 we read:

“About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.”

So having insulted his father by wishing he were dead, he now wastes all the money he was graciously given, on sin – in this case ‘wild living’. Today it would be like flying off to some city famous for its ‘anything goes’ culture, to live a life of debauchery – taking advantage of loose women, driving fast cars, using drugs and alcohol. Whatever, takes your fancy.

And so it is that my second point is that irrespective of how sinful we are, God still loves us!

Of course he wants us to change from our ways, BUT He still loves us.

The young son seemingly got his just deserts because the Bible tells us in Romans 6 v 23 that ***‘the wages of sin is death’***. A famine came and he began to starve; he was close to physical death - and it’s interesting that Jesus says he worked in a man’s field feeding his pigs – interesting because for a Jew to tend to pigs was the height of humiliation! In Old Testament law, pigs were considered unclean and in Deuteronomy 14 it says: ***‘You shall neither eat of their flesh nor touch their carcass.’***

I did wonder if Jesus included this reference to the man’s humiliation of having to feed pigs as a kind of consequence for humiliating his father in the first place. The religious audience might have identified with the Old Testament law of ‘an eye for an eye’, a ‘tooth for a tooth’. I could even imagine them giggling at the sinful man’s fate.

Now we see in verses 17 to 19 the young man comes to his senses:

It says ***“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against***

both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”

In order for this son to even consider returning home, he had to be near to death. How could he possibly explain to his father what he had done with all the money, and still expect his father to welcome him home?

He was starving and felt humiliated, but he realised his only chance of staying alive was to return to his father, and hope for the best.

When we play with sin, God can often take us to the very edge of what we can endure, because He knows it is only then that we will confess and repent of our pride and turn back to Him.

I am sure this man (the son) had carefully rehearsed what he was going to say to his father, because all he could really expect was some degree of mercy, hence his hope that his father might offer him the job of a being a servant.

Now what does Jesus tell us in verse 20:

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.”

What a wonderful picture! The father, full of compassion, running to greet his son – can’t wait to embrace him. What a loving dad.

Actually, if we take time to investigate the culture of the time, we discover this is the action of a father showing **outrageous** grace and love. It was far from normal human love at that time.

The reason my third point was that God will go to extraordinary lengths to show us His love. Is this:

When a patriarch (a family chief) or a father had been so wronged by a family member he would not even *consider* running to the offender. He would never even make the first move. This would be unthinkable. The offender – in this case the younger son – would be expected to more or less get on his hands and knees and grovel. But Jesus wanted to show the religious leaders that their understanding was not right. God doesn’t want any repentant person to grovel and be humiliated. No, God is looking out for everyone caught up in sin to come to their senses, to repent, turn around and come back to Him, remorseful and aware of his or her unworthiness just as this son was.

As soon as God sees our recognition of our sin and our heart's desire to change, then God runs as fast as He can to greet and forgive us.

Outrageous, extraordinary love!

Because God looks at and knows our heart, in this story God knew what the young man was going to say before he got there, although God still needed to hear him say it. In verse 21 we read:

'His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

This is why I believe it is so important that when we sin, we confess out loud to God what we have done, acknowledge before God that it was wrong (this defeats pride, because pride says 'I was right') and ask God to forgive us. This is one reason I love the Anglican Church's liturgy, because every Sunday during the service there is a section in the prayers where the congregation acknowledge and confess their sins to Almighty God. It has great power in the Heavenly realm when we confess out loud this prayer, with a sincere and repentant heart.

Moving on, we now see that when we repent, God doesn't just restore us and our relationship with Him, but He does it in an extraordinary way! Listen again to verses 22 to 24:

'But his father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found." So the party began.'

This for me is the pivotal verse – it gives us all hope. No matter what you and I have done – either in the past or today or what we may do in the future - the moment we get on our knees and ask God for mercy – for forgiveness – the moment we show real and honest remorse, God treats us like a King!

Here, the disobedient but repentant son is re-united to his father. The new ring for his finger signifies that the relationship is completely restored. He hoped to be given the role of a servant but instead he was given back his original position as the father's youngest son once again - with a feast to celebrate!

God truly is the 'God of the party'.

When those who love the Lord Jesus and repent of their sins get to Heaven – then as well as praising God day after day, there is evidence here, and in other parts of the New Testament, to show that God will invite us to the most amazing banquets, where we will party with each other and with Him in an appropriate way.

So please know that God's love for you is outrageous, unconditional and not based on your performance - present or past.

Like any good parent, all God is looking for in His rebellious, wayward children is that we come to our senses when we sin, say we are sorry, repent, and turn back to Him.

He is quick to forgive – He loves us so much that He is standing there, arms outstretched, waiting to forgive and restore us back to the relationship He so desires with each of us.

As we know from this parable, God's love for us is unconditional, BUT in order to live in a right relationship with Him, we have a big part to play.

That is to live our lives with a repentant heart towards Him. When we do this and regularly confess our daily sins to Him and receive His forgiveness, our desire to keep sinning will lose its appeal. Our Heavenly Father's love for us through the finished work of the Cross of Jesus Christ will cause us to detest every kind of sin, and we will long to run to our Heavenly Father in confession and repentance so that we can continually remain in God's presence, enjoying His peace and joy both in this life and the next.

Bless His Holy Name!

Amen

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