

Sermon Text: Luke 15:11-32

Well, as I look out into the congregation, I just see this look of shock and just this dismay everywhere, and I can't figure out if it's because I'm preaching or if it's because I'm wearing a suit. At any rate . . .

The passage that I read to you this morning is from the gospel of Luke, and it's been called the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the lost son. It's probably the most famous parable in the Bible, and probably one of the most famous stories in history. I think we just have a hard time relating to this passage. If this passage comes up in Bible study or something, we usually just skip over it. I think that's because, if you take the average person in Greenwood, the average person in Greenwood is not a prodigal. It says in the scripture, just to recap the story, it says a man had two sons. The younger one went to the father, and said, "Give me my share of the estate." The father gave it to him. The younger son went out, lived wildly, recklessly, finally came to his senses, came back in, and the father welcomes him in with open arms. The older son can't understand that, and he doesn't think it's fair. The older son leaves the house, and doesn't go back in. When we look at this passage, we have to look at the context, and the context is the gospel of Luke, and in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is going around, and he's arguing and he's debating with these men called the Pharisees. The Pharisees have kind of a negative connotation to them. When we think of the Pharisees, we think of the bad guys, we think of villains. I want you to know the Pharisees weren't like that. The Pharisees were very moral people. They tried to obey the Ten Commandments. They followed every single bit of the law as much as they could. They were very moral people. They were the good people. They were just the average class in society at the time. And so when Jesus is telling this parable, there are two types of people in the audience. You've got the prostitutes and the sinners and the tax collectors. These were the bad people. He was talking to them, but he was also talking to the Pharisees. So you had two groups of people in the audience. What this parable is really aimed at is the Pharisees, the good people. He wanted to tell something about them. Really, this passage, and we're going to look at what it takes to have a personal relationship with God, and we're going to do this by asking three questions. The first is, who is the younger brother? The younger brother is the prodigal. He's the one who goes out and has a wild life so we're going to ask who is the younger brother. The second question is who is the elder brother? The elder brother was the one who stayed in the house, obeyed the father completely, but was very upset when the younger brother came in. Thirdly, we're going to ask who comes home? Which one of the brothers comes home? When we look at that, we'll be able to tell how we come home. So who's the younger brother? Well, the first thing we need to know about the younger brother is that he's lost. The title of the parable is "The Lost Son." That's usually who they're referring to. He's lost. He's goes to the father, and he asks the father for his share of the inheritance. We know about that. In the laws of the time there wasn't necessarily anything illegal about that. It was strange for someone to go and ask his father for his inheritance before the father had died, but legally it was okay. It was just a little strange so the sin he commits is not asking for his inheritance early. The other thing is that he lives in his father's house. Very wealthy. He lived in his father's house. He could have had anything he wanted. He could have asked the father for a new Lamborghini. The father would have bought it for him. He could have had anything he wanted, but still he goes to the father and says, "Give me my inheritance." Why does he do that? The bottom line is, he wants the

Jack Carmody

05/22/05

father's things, but he doesn't want the father. He wants the father's money. He wants the father's power. He wants everything the father has, but he doesn't want the father in his life.

I want to define sin, and say that sin is not necessarily breaking the rules. Sin is running from God in order to get control of your life. Sin is rooted in a desire for independence. Inside of all of us, we have this desire to be self-sufficient, to serve ourselves. What the younger brother is saying to the father is, “I wish you were dead. Give me my inheritance now. I wish you were dead.” That's what happens. That's the sin. He wants independence from the father.

We see in Genesis 3, in the fall of man, that sin creates a barrier between us and God. Adam and Eve are walking around in the garden, and God gave them one rule. He said, “Don't eat from that tree over there.” Our Bibles are a couple of thousand pages. Their Bible was one line. “Don't eat from that tree.” Now, that's all they had to do, and they blew it. They blew it. They said, “God, are you trying to control our lives?” They wanted independence. They sinned. They ate from the fruit. What's the first thing they did when God comes looking for them? They hid. Before they took the fruit, they were perfect. They were with God. They were perfect. Their fellowship with God was perfect. The first thing they did when they sinned was they hid. That's what we learn about sin. Sin is not necessarily about breaking the rules. Sin is about trying to control your own life apart from the Father, and it creates a barrier between us and God. It created a barrier between the younger son and the father.

Here's what's unique about the younger brother. He's running from God, that's pretty clear. He's not very subtle about it. The passage said he went out and lived a wild life. The word for that is reckless living. He threw caution to the wind, and did whatever he wanted to. He openly rejects God. There's no doubt about it. He leaves the father, openly rejects God. Where can you find younger brothers? In today's time, where can you find younger brothers? Well, these younger brothers are openly rejecting God, and a lot of times you can find them in college. I'd say the majority of college students, and I did say the majority, are younger brothers. They openly reject God by the way they live. You can find them at fraternity parties. They'll be there. They use bad language a lot of times. You can find them in bars. You might find them in church, but it's either because their parents made them or it's to ask forgiveness for the night before. That's the younger brother. Younger brothers say, “I do what I want. I'm in control of my life. I don't need God.” That's the younger brother.

The same question is, who is the elder brother? The elder brother is someone we can more relate to, and the first thing about the elder brother is the elder brother is also lost. He's lost. He's running from God, just like the younger brother, but he's running in a very, very different way. How do we know this? How do we know this? First of all, the younger brother takes off with the inheritance and goes out to ruin his life. For those of us who have siblings, I've got a sister, and if my sister did that, I'd be out that door after her in two seconds, I promise you. I think we all would. We would go after them, talk some sense into them. The older brother doesn't. He lets his younger brother go. That's the first tip off. Secondly, the bigger one, is that when the younger brother comes home, the younger brother repents, realizes that he messed up, and comes back. The elder brother doesn't come with open arms. He's mad. He doesn't understand it. Why is this fair? He comes in and he says, “I've slaved for you.” He says to the father, “I've slaved for you, and you haven't given me anything.” What is he

saying? He’s saying, “I’ve been the good person. Where’s my blessings? I’ve been the good person. This younger brother? He went out and he destroyed his life. Why are you blessing him? I’m the good person.” That’s what the elder brother is saying. Here’s what we learn from the elder brother. You can obey God and still be lost. You can outwardly be for God, but inwardly be very apart from God. Whereas the younger brother is very open in his rejection of God, he openly rejects God, the younger brother wants control of his life by breaking the rules, breaking the rules. The elder brother, on the other hand, is still running from God, but he wants control of his life through obeying the rules. Just like the younger brother, there was a barrier between him and the father, there is an even bigger barrier between the elder brother and the father. What the elder brother is saying is, “I’ve lived a good life. I’ve never done anything wrong. I’ve slaved for you.” We have to take his word for that. He says he’s obeyed the father. We have to believe him. He’s done everything right. He’s done everything right. He expects that the father owes him something. He’s coming to God and saying, “Look God, I’ve lived a good life. You owe me. You owe me.” Now the first objection that usually comes up when we talk about this is how do we really know that the older brother is lost. In verse 31, chapter 15, it says, “You are always with me.” That would seem to imply that the father is saying, “You are always with me, son.” That would seem to imply that the elder brother isn’t lost, but I think that is more evidence that he is more lost than we could even imagine.

If you go to Matthew, chapter 7, verse 22, it’s Jesus talking, and he’s talking about the last day, and he says, “Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you.’” What that passage is saying is that you can do a lot of things for God. These are good things. You can prophesy. You can drive out demons and perform miracles. Those are very good things. He’s even saying you can do them in the name of the Lord, and on the last day, God is going to say, “I never knew you. I never knew you.” So outwardly, you can be very for God. You can do things on the outside that make it look like you are really serving God, but on the inside you can be very far from him.

A good example of this is John Wesley. John Wesley, of course, founded our denomination. John Wesley was a preacher, was a missionary, actually lived in England, and went to the New World, and tried to convert the Indians. He went over there, and he failed. The missionary journey failed. He was a missionary. He was a preacher. He led Bible studies at Oxford. These are all good things. Yet he didn’t become a Christian until after that. He did very good things on the outside, but his heart was very far from the Lord, and he admitted that. He admitted that.

Where exactly is the elder brother today? Where exactly is the elder brother today? The elder brother is the average person in the South. The average person in the South would say they’re a good person. They’ve grown up in church. They’ve gone to Sunday School. They’ve got the perfect attendance pins. They’ve got all that. You can find the elder brother volunteering. He’s volunteering at the Soup Kitchen. They’re doing Habitat for Humanity. They’re doing Bible studies. They’re in the church. They’re doing really great things. There’s a place in First Corinthians 13, a very famous chapter on love, and Paul starts reeling off these different characteristics of love. He says you can prophesy, you can fathom all mysteries, he lists off all these things, you can have faith that moves mountains. Faith that moves mountains is a

“Running From God”

Jack Carmody

05/22/05

leadership gift. Faith that moves mountains, if you have that, is someone who can gather people together and go do something. You can be a leader in the church and still not get it and still be like the elder brother.

That’s the elder brother. The elder brother says, “I’m a good person, and I deserve a good life for it. God, you owe me.” That’s the elder brother.

The third point is who comes home? We have the younger brother and we have the elder brother. Which one of these guys comes home? This is where the really shocking part of the Scripture comes in. We’ve established both brothers are running from God. Both brothers are running from God. The younger brother is running in a very obvious way. He’s living wildly. He’s drinking. He’s partying. He says he’s got prostitutes. He’s very open about it. The elder brother, on the other hand, is running, but he’s running through being a good person, and he’s trying to hold it over God. So, who comes home? Well, in the end, the story says that the younger brother comes home, and the elder brother doesn’t. The wild son comes home, and the good son stays out of the home. Why is that? The younger brother was running from God, and he knew it. He was very open. He made no bones about it. He rejected God openly. He knew it so he could come to a point where he repented whereas the elder brother never realized he was running. The elder brother held his goodness, held his good deeds, over the Father. If you were to talk to him about repentance, he wouldn’t know where to start. Repent. Why do I need to repent? Talk to my brother. That’s what he would say. His goodness kept him from the Father. Obeying all the rules kept the elder brother from the Father so he doesn’t come home. So why does the younger brother come home? Why does the wild kid come home? He comes home because he grasps the Gospel. The younger brother got to the point in his life where he was with the pigs. He was the lowest of the low. He finally got the Gospel. Here’s what the Gospel says. This is probably my favorite summation of the Gospel. One pastor says, “The Gospel is realizing that you are more flawed and sinful than you ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope.” The Gospel says that you are more flawed and sinful than you ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope. The first part of that is a deeper view of sin.

A good example of this, I think, is from Martin Luther. Martin Luther was a great church reformer, and he was a monk. He spent most of his days in the monastery. All male. No women there. He spent his days praying and fasting and doing Bible study and meditation, and he would go to confession. He would go see the priest, and he would spend hours in confession. Hours. I mean he’s in a monastery, what could you possibly be confessing? Father, forgive me for coveting Father Thomas’ potatoes at dinner yesterday. He’s not doing anything. He’s meditating. He’s praying. How can you be sinning at that point? He just felt horrible. He spent hours in confession. Hours. We can laugh about that. That seems kind of crazy. Martin Luther got it. He really understood our condition. Our condition is bad. So you are more flawed and sinful than you ever dared believe, but you are more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope. We’ve got this view of our sin. It’s bad. We’re sinners. Our sin runs deeper. It’s deeper than just obeying the rules, and it’s deeper than breaking the rules. Sin is wanting control of our life. The younger brother saw that, and he realized when he was with the pigs, and he realized that. He realizes he’s going to come back to the father, and he’s going to repent. He’s going to say, “Father, I’ve sinned against Heaven and I’ve sinned against

“Running From God”

Jack Carmody

05/22/05

you.” He’s not just sinned against his father, he’s sinned against God, and he realizes that. What are his expectations when he comes home? He’s expecting the father maybe to let him come back in the house and just be a servant. That’s all he wants. He just wants some food to eat. He’s ruined his life. He realizes that, and he accepts it. He’s coming home, and he expects to get yelled at. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen. What does the father do? The father’s waiting on the porch. The father sees him coming from way far off, and the father runs after him. Before the younger brother could even get a speech out, the father kisses him. The father kisses him. The father accepts him with open arms. Not only does he let him back in the house, they celebrate. Bring me the ring. Bring me the robe. Put sandals on his feet. Kill the fattened calf. Celebration. So not only is the younger brother allowed back in the house, he is put at the same status that he was before he left. Maybe even higher. What does this have to teach us? This passage is about two brothers, but it’s also about us. It’s about how can we come home.

I want to talk to you, those of you out there who are the younger brother, that relate to the younger brother, that are openly living a wild life, that are openly rejecting God, and I want to say, stop running. Stop running today. Stop running does not mean clean up your life. Whenever I talk to people about Christianity, the biggest thing I hear is, “Yeah, I’ll come to church. I’ll come to Bible study. I need to get my life cleaned up first. I need to stop the drinking. I need to stop sleeping around. I need to stop all that.” That’s not Christianity. Christianity isn’t about cleaning up your life. It’s looking to Jesus Christ who says, “The only way you can be clean is through my blood.” Jesus says the only way you can be clean is through accepting me and my sacrifice on the cross for you. That’s the only way you can be clean.

I want to talk to the elder brother. Probably most of us in here will relate to the elder brother. To the elder brother I will say, stop running. Stop running. We as elder brothers we think we’re the good people. We hold our goodness over God. We look to God to accept us because of our good deeds. That’s not what the Gospel says. If we’re looking to our good deeds for acceptance before the Lord, we all fail every day. I’ve failed already half a dozen times this morning. We fail, all the time. Look to Jesus. Jesus Christ, who was born in the manger, lived the perfect life, faced every temptation you can possibly imagine, and passed, perfectly. Not only that, he was killed for it. You see the crown of thorns below us. I’m pretty sure the one they used back then had a lot more thorns and it was a lot sharper. That’s what Jesus wore. Jesus Christ went to the cross for us, for our sins, so we could be forgiven, so we could be accepted before the Father not based on what we do, but based on what Christ has done on the cross. In Christ’s experience on the cross, he was tortured. He was tortured, and he did it for us. He did it for us. So, on the last day, I don’t want us to come before the Father, before God, and for Him to say, “I never knew you.” Repent. Believe in Jesus. Give your life completely to Jesus. Not just your church life, not just your business life, not just your school life, not just your college life, your entire life, and then the last day, we’ll come before the Father, and he’ll say, “You are my son, whom I love, with whom I’m well pleased.”