



THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Part 65 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 15:11–32 | March 06, 2011

Luke 15:11–32

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰ And he arose and 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. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the 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. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

FATHERHOOD IN THE BIBLE

Father. Father. Of all the words that I’ve had the pleasure of preaching in fifteen years at Mars Hill Church, every time we talk about father, the reactions are extreme.

For some of you, that word immediately conjures up something very positive. Your father loved you and you love him and that relationship is warm and it was safe and it was healthy.

For some of you, it’s very negative. Your father was absent; he was abusive; he was violent; he was greedy, stingy, religious, controlling, negligent, selfish, irresponsible, or domineering in a deadly way.

For some of you, it’s just an ache. You wish you had a father. You’ve always wanted a father. Forty-three percent of children tonight in our nation go to bed without a father, no dad. If those statistics were true at Mars Hill, today we would have five hundred children at church with no dad. In the black community, that number goes up to 70 percent. Seventy percent of black children have no father. Native American populations, reports indicate, are likely even higher. A friend of mine who has a great church in downtown Philadelphia, an African-American pastor with a multi-ethnic congregation, but in his primarily black neighborhood, 90 percent of all births—we’re not even talking about and counting abortions—90 percent of all births in his neighborhood are to a single mother, no father. No father. We don’t have a lot of examples for what a good father is and does.

And every time we hit the concept and idea of fatherhood in the Bible, there’s a wide variance in reactions. And we do so again today as we enter into the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32. We’re going to get to know an amazing father and his interaction with a rebellious and a religious son.

And as we enter into the story, it’s a parable that Jesus taught on his way to Jerusalem to be crucified in our place for our sins. Jesus is the greatest storyteller in the history of the world. The good Samaritan and the story of the prodigal son are arguably the two most profound, beloved stories in the history of the world. Non-Christians even know these stories. You could argue that the story, the parable of the prodigal son, is the most famous, most

beloved story ever told. Ever told. It's the longest of Jesus' parables. Shakespeare wrote plays based upon it. Rembrandt painted a painting of this story of the prodigal son.

And as we enter into the story, we need to first acknowledge who the characters are. The father is ultimately to reveal to us God the Father, and then the two sons are opportunities for us to insert ourselves in the story. Which are we, the rebellious or the religious?

And I'd say one thing as well, for those of you who want to study this section of your Bible a little more thoroughly, we've got some copies of this book for sale. It's a nice little hardbound easy read for \$15, \$5 off the list price. *The Prodigal God* by Tim Keller, a dear pastor and good friend and someone who's helped me a lot over the years and I have the pleasure of serving with on The Gospel Coalition counsel. Some of you will want to study this more thoroughly and his book is great.

Father. As we investigate the fatherhood of God in the parable, it is also an opportunity for those of you men who are single to be thinking about becoming a father, maybe even marrying one of those single mothers. For us men who are honored and privileged to be fathers, it's an opportunity for us to examine how we are fathering our own children. And for those who do not have a father, it's an opportunity to remember that God himself is a Father to the fatherless.

THE FATHER

And since faith comes by hearing the Word of God, let's just read it in totality and then unpack it in succession. Luke 15:11–32, "And he," that is Jesus, "said, 'There was a man who had two sons. 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. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in 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 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, and no one gave him anything.

"'But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will 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.'" And he arose and 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 him, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the 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 son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated,'" or begged, "'him, but 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 fattened calf for him!" And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother, was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.'"

A father and two sons, one son who is rebellious, the other who is religious. We'll start with the father. The father here is by all accounts an amazing father. To be sure, sometimes parents reap what we sow. The way we raise our children sets them up for a pattern of sin and death. Sometimes, however, a good parent has a rebellious child. That is the case here. The father has loved and served his children well. There is no obvious reason that this son would so hate his father.

Additionally, we see that this father is a good businessman. And this is a part of the story that oftentimes gets overlooked. He understood how to make money. He understood how to invest and save and spend. Proverbs says that a wise man leaves an inheritance for his children's children. That means that men are to be thinking not just about themselves, but their families and their extended families.

Ultimately, men, it should be our ambition when we die that we leave something not only for our families but our extended families, our children's children, our grandchildren; that we should be able to, by the grace of God and good stewardship and prudent living and hard working and smart investing, help them with a down payment for their home. If our grandsons want to plant a church, we should be the first ones to write the check to help that become a reality. That should be the desire in the heart of every man, not to just waste all of his money and go into debt pursuing toys and possessions, but investing in his legacy and his future.

That's exactly what this father did. He apparently was successful in business. We can infer or assume, because he's a godly man, he's given generously to God. He helps the poor, he stewards his resources well, and he has saved up to give an inheritance to his sons.

And this inheritance may have started long before he was even born because in that day the wealth, particularly the land in this agrarian society, was passed on from one generation to the next. So as a boy, you would work the land that your dad worked and your granddaddy worked and your great-granddaddy worked and things would be kept in the family so that the family could have ongoing wealth, security, and some provision.

And so the father by all accounts is good with money and he's good with love. He's built a world for his boys to grow up in and he has affectionately

tended to their hearts in that world he has made. And the boys respond tragically.

THE REBELLIOUS SON

The first responds rebelliously. And the rebellious son says and does the unthinkable. The unthinkable. He dishonors his father. He reaches a point of at least physical maturity, he's not emotionally or spiritually mature, he's like many young men today. He's immature, though physically grown.

And he approaches his father and he essentially says this: "I wish you were dead. The best-case scenario for my life would be that you were dead. And it's a complicating variable, Dad, that you're still alive, because you have a lot of wealth and I know that a third of that inheritance will go to me. And I would really like that money. And since you're alive, I can't have it. So I regret the fact that you're alive. I wish you were dead. I love your wealth more than I love you. In fact, I would like to take all of my inheritance and leave."

Now, as a dad with five kids, three boys, two girls, this would destroy me. This would absolutely destroy me. The thought of one of my kids looking me in the eye and actually saying, "The best-case scenario for me is that you were dead. The second-best-case scenario is, Dad, that you cash in your retirement account, you liquidate your life insurance, you sell possessions, that you cash in all your investments, that you do so quickly, even if at a loss, so you can just give me the money so I can leave. And I never want to see you again, Dad. I wish you were dead."

That's exactly what this young man does. He dishonors his father. He disgraces his father. He disowns his father. He does the unthinkable. And the father gives this young man what he wants. And in so doing, he took a massive financial loss. There's no way that you liquidate things quickly for a good price. Money he's worked his whole life to accrue is gone. Furthermore, this is the money that the dad needs to pay his own bills and live his life. If he or his wife should get sick, this is money that should be spent for their keep. He liquidates his assets and he hands it all to his foolish son.

And what does the son do? He literally turns his back on his father and he walks away. And I need you to see that. I need you to see the dad handing to the son a great amount of wealth as the son turns his back and walks away. And I anticipate the father just stood there weeping, just bawling, perhaps even hoping that at some point the son will turn around and at least give him a farewell glance. And the son never does. Just with a hard heart he literally just turns away from his father and he just walks away. He doesn't turn around. He doesn't respond. He doesn't make eye contact. In his heart, his father's dead and there stands his devastated dad.

And because he's a fool, he does like even many of you have done. Probably moves to a big city. He doesn't understand saving or investing or finances. This would be the equivalent of a guy who gets a big inheritance from his family and, next thing you know, he's out buying new clothes and a new car and a new condo and new furnishings and rounds of drinks at the bar are on him and really nice vacation and lots of toys and technology and loose women and strip clubs and prostitutes and women who don't have character and aren't meritorious of marriage; they're in it for the money.

And he just starts spending. And next thing you know, he's running out of money. And a famine hits. That's their equivalent of an economic downturn. All of a sudden, real estate's down, gas prices are up, unemployment rates are high. Your investments go upside down. Everything that you had is worth less. Financial crisis hits. He's been living beyond his means and now it's catching up with him.

It gets to the point that he has to start selling his assets, like his father did, at a significantly reduced rate. This is the guy who's walking into the pawnshop with his Xbox one week and his flat screen the next week. All right, and he's got his car for sale on Craigslist, you know, "need to sell immediately, best offer." He's that guy. He's taken all of his clothes down to the Buffalo Exchange. He's trying to make pennies on the dollar. He's that guy. And pretty soon he's kicked out of his condo. He can't afford to pay his bills. He's taking the bus. He needs to look for work. Nobody will hire him because he's not been a good employee. He hasn't built a decent resume. The market is upside down, there's no work to be had. Pretty soon, this guy's homeless, he's on the streets, he's lost weight, he's maybe strung out. He's that kind of guy. He's looking rough, it's going bad.

He finally gets the only job that he can obtain and that's to work for the Gentile pagans on their pig farm. Now, he's a Jewish boy. This is the worst possible job for a Jewish boy. Pigs are unclean animals. You're not supposed to work with them. You're not supposed to eat them. And he is out tending to the pagans' pigs. And he's so hungry that he's looking at the pig food, wondering if maybe he should eat it.

And nobody comes along and does anything for him. The last time this guy got a gift was from his dad. It gets to the point where he is hungry, he is homeless, he is dirty. This is the kind of guy who walks into the mission on his last leg and you can tell it's been a rough run for him. That's exactly what this boy looks like.

And what does he do? The Bible says he comes to his senses. He thinks to himself, "I'm going to die. Yet at home, my dad, who's got a good financial mind and had a plan, he's got servants, people who work for him, they're not starving to death. My dad's feeding them. They're not homeless, my dad is housing them. My dad's a great guy. I'm an idiot. I need to get home to my dad. Maybe he'll allow me to be a servant. Maybe he'll allow me to just work." This is like a wealthy, affluent father and the son's thinking, "Maybe he'll let me be a janitor. Maybe there are some floors I could sweep if I tell him how sorry I am and how stupid I've been."

And so the Bible says that he understood his sin and he acknowledged his sin. He says, "I've sinned against my Father in heaven and I've sinned against my father on earth." And that's the truth—he's sinned against both. And repentance is literally turning around. So as he turned his back on his father and literally walked away toward a life of sin, he comes to his senses. Repentance is he turns around and he decides, "That's it, I'm going to walk back to my dad. I'm going to walk back to my dad."

THE FATHER RECEIVES HIS SON

And then we pick up the story with the father. And the story says that while his son was still a long ways off, the father saw him coming. What was the father doing? Waiting, hopefully and anxiously. You get the picture that this dad every morning would wake up and look out the window just to see, "Is he coming home?" All right, the father's getting reports, maybe from friends or extended relationships, "Yeah, he's on drugs now. He's drinking a lot. Yeah, he almost—he passed out the other night, he OD'd. He got arrested, he got kicked out of his place." And the dad's heart is broken, "That's my son." "He's lost a lot of weight. He had to go to the clinic to get an AIDS test. He's really in a bad place."

Every morning, he opens the window, looks out, "Is he coming? I don't see him." But every morning, he's hoping to see his son return. You get the idea that he's out in the fields during the day, working or supervising his employees. He's the dad who's looking over his shoulder, like, "Is he coming? Just checking. No, he's not here yet. Lord God, please bring him home. Please don't let him die." And then, one day, he sees a figure way down the road. And he wonders, "Is that my boy?" As his son gets closer, he can tell from his build and the way he walks, because every dad knows who his kids are, we observe them all the time, "That's him! My son's back!"

So what does the dad do? He runs. Now, culturally you don't do this in an eastern culture. Grown men don't run, right? You see a grown man running, one of two things is happening. He's committed a crime, okay, or someone is trying to do something really bad to him, okay? Men don't run and old men don't run, especially in an eastern culture. Even to this day, it's a dignified culture. Older men are to be respectable and respected and they carry themselves with dignity. Plus, in that culture, he's wearing a robe with an undergarment, so to run means he needs to be like a little girl who hikes up his skirt. All right, there's no grown man who wants to do a little skirt-pull-up jog, right? I mean, that's not a dude thing to do, right? Now people are going to see his undergarments, which was really weird. All right, I mean, just all of this weird. But he can't wait another second to be reconciled to his son.

And in that culture, there were a lot of things he could have done to his son. He could have disowned him. All right, the Bible says to honor your mother and father, Exodus 20:12. It's one of the Ten Commandments. He had absolutely dishonored his father, so the father could have disowned him.

He could have had him beaten. There was a provision in the law that if your son rebelled against you, you could beat him. He could have had him beat. Some of us do that to our children with our words. "You are so stupid. I told you so. You're an idiot. You've ruined everything. How could you do this to me?"

He could have actually had him killed. All right, it's in Deuteronomy 21, there's a provision that if you rebel against your parents and it's extreme enough, you could be put to death.

So in coming home, this boy's taking an enormous risk. He's unsure what kind of reception he might receive. You can anticipate this boy's looking at the ground and he's thinking to himself, "What have I done? Lord God, help me out. What's my dad going to say? Is he going to disown me? Is he going to beat me? Is he going to kill me? Is he going to shame me? Is he going to shun me?" Kind of see the boy looking at the ground, shaking his head, nervous, thinking it through.

And he looks up, there's his dad, running with a smile on his face, yelling at the top of his lungs, "Welcome home! Welcome home! Welcome home!" His arms are stretched out as he approaches and his robe falls to the ground and the dad grabs his son and gives him a big hug and picks him up. And the Bible says that he kissed him, in the Greek, "kept kissing him." Some of you dads are not affectionate enough with your children, especially your sons. Some of you say, "Well, I need to be tough."

Fathers, we need to be tough and tender. If you're only tender, you're not going to protect your family. If you're only tough, you're going to be their abuser. So you need to be tough for your family, be tender with your family. You protect them and you be a safe place. And this father, he's here very tender with his son. Some of you have never been hugged by a father. Some of you men haven't been hugged by your father in years. I just need to tell all of you dads, you always hug and kiss your kids. It doesn't matter how big they are, even the boys. Now you don't do it embarrassingly. All right, you don't run into their dugout after they hit a double and kiss them, all right? That's not acceptable. But when you're home or when you're alone, you acceptably, lovingly give them a hug and a kiss. And this could even be coming up from behind them when the boys are bigger, give them a big bear hug and a kiss on top of the head. "Your daddy loves you." And they'll—sometimes they'll squirm. And they'll say things like, "Don't do that!" And what they mean is, "Do that again." That's what they mean. And that's exactly what this daddy does.

And it says that he had compassion. Can you see that? In the dad's eyes, compassion. It says that he embraced him and he kissed him and that he celebrated. The dad is really happy. And again, who's the father? In the story, who's the father typify? It's God, right, that we're like this prodigal son. We sin and rebel and ruin our life, and if in repentance we turn back to the Father, he runs to meet us. He's compassionate, he embraces us, he blesses us, he kisses us, he celebrates with us. What a great Father we have.

And he's here setting a precedent for the whole community because the other people would treat the son however the father treated the son. He got to make the call. Because he's rejoicing, everyone should rejoice. Because he's received his son, everyone should receive his son. And this is a good word for us as a church. If God embraces someone, we need to embrace them. If God welcomes someone, we need to welcome them. If God has thrown his arms around them, we need to do the same.

And the Bible says then the father is lavish. It says, "Get him a ring." And a ring in that day was a way of transacting business. This would be akin in our day to the father saying, "Go get the notary public. We've got to add this boy to our bank accounts. We're going to need a credit card for him. He's going to need some clothes. He's sold everything, he's lost everything. We're going to need to bless him. Legally, financially, we're going to reinstate him as a member of the family."

Now some of you say, "He doesn't deserve that!" That's grace. Grace is unmerited. Grace is undeserved. Romans tells us that it's the kindness of God

that leads to repentance. This dad is going to be kind and gracious to this boy, and that kind grace is going to continue to change him. It's the same kind grace that caused him to come home. It will compel him to continue with his father.

Additionally, he says, "Get him some shoes." In that day, slaves were barefoot. Those who were free wore shoes. This boy apparently had gotten to such a desperate place that he had sold his shoes. And so he's humiliated. And the father says, "No, we're going to put shoes on you, Son." It means he made that whole walk home just feeling—and the roads in those days were dirty and gross. Animals traveled on them and there wasn't a clean-up crew so there's just a really gross condition on the road of animal feces and urine and dirt and mud and trash all over his feet. He's embarrassed, he's humiliated, he's ashamed. With every single step, he's reminded, "I've really sinned against my father. And look what I've done to myself."

And his father says, "Let's clean him up. Let's put some shoes on him. My son needs his dignity back." He doesn't look at his son and say, "You know, in a few months, if I feel like you've actually made some changes, then I'm going to take you shoe shopping." Some parents are like that. "If you earn it, then I'll give you grace." Well, then it's not grace because grace is by definition undeserved. And he says, "Let's get him a coat," like Joseph got this coat from his father. "Let's honor him, let's cover him, let's protect him, let's comfort him."

How do you think the boy feels at that moment? He's overwhelmed. See, because in that day, if a son rebelled against a father like that, it was his duty to bring a gift to his father, sort of a peace offering and an apology. "Dad, I am so sorry and I bought this gift and I'm giving it to you so that you'll know that I'm really sorry." The boy comes what? Hands full, or hands empty? Hands empty. And this is a great picture of us, empty-handed sinners just going to the Father, asking for grace—actually, I should correct that. I feel like the Holy Spirit wants me to correct that. This boy didn't ask for anything, did he? The father just gave it. The father just gave it, and that's how God works with us. He gives things to people who don't deserve it and didn't even ask for it. He's a God of grace. Salvation is this amazing gift to a bunch of ill-deserving rebels who don't even ask for it. And that's what the father does.

Can you feel the heart of the son? And then the father goes over the top. "Somebody get me an event coordinator! We're going to need a band. All right, set up the tables, invite the whole community. Everybody who was so grieved for me and embarrassed for me, bring them in. We're going to have a huge barbecue." They didn't eat meat very often, especially a fattened calf. This is for a big deal, like a wedding. "We're going to throw a huge party and I'm going to spend more money on this kid. This kid who's already blown a lot of money, we're going to blow some more. And we're going to rejoice and celebrate that what was lost is found." And everybody comes and rejoices.

THE RELIGIOUS SON

And as they're partying and celebrating the return of the rebellious son, we're then introduced to the religious son. The religious son is a seemingly good boy. He's out in the field, working hard. See, because now his job has gotten harder. It used to be that he and his brother split oversight of the family business. Well, since his brother went off to the big city to blow money and be a fool, now he has to do both jobs. He's working harder than ever.

So he's out in the field, working hard. He hears a ruckus and he sees a crowd and he's wondering what's going on, so he approaches the home and the band gets louder and he can smell barbecue and he's wondering what the situation is. And some of the people who are on the outskirts of the party say, "Haven't you heard the news? Your brother was lost, now he's found. He's returned home. Your dad's throwing a huge party and he's blowing a ton of money to celebrate the return of your brother."

And the religious brother becomes indignant and bitter and self-righteous and critical. And the religious brother walks up to his father and he dishonors his dad. "Dad, what are you doing?" You ever said that to your parent? "What are you doing?" "Well, your brother, he's repented. He's come back to God and to us. There's hope, he's not dead. I think it's real and genuine, so we need to celebrate this and encourage this. Son, please come in. Join the party. Your brother would love to see you. He feels bad about what he's done."

"Dad, there's no way I'm going in! I'm not going to reconcile with him. When he turned his back and he walked away, he was dead to me. I don't want to see him. I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to celebrate him. I don't want to treat him like a hero. Dad, I'm still a virgin. He's been out with all kinds of loose women. I've not spent any of your money. He blew a third of our estate. I was doing all my chores and doing his as well. He's an embarrassment. He's a humiliation. He's a shame. That he has the same last name as me, it's humiliating. People ask me, 'How is your brother doing?' I don't even want to talk about him. I'm ashamed of him."

The father says, "Please, Son, please come in to the party." "No." And he dishonors his father. He keeps saying, "You." You can see his finger pointed and his brow furrowed, "No, you! You, Dad, you need think about this. You need to rebuke him. You need to discipline him. You need to make him pay. You."

What does the father say? He says, "Son, you're always with me. Son, I'm not agreeing with anything your brother has done, but I love you both with all of my heart and I welcome him home and I'm glad you've never left. You and I have always been together. My heart's desire is that we would always be together. This isn't anything negative about you, Son. He was lost, now he's found. I've got my sons back. I'm just really happy. Yeah, he's lost weight. Yeah, we got to put him in rehab. Yeah, his life is a wreck. But he's alive and he's back. And were this you, I would feel exactly the same because I love both you boys the same." This dad's not playing favorites.

He also says, "All that is mine is yours." "Son, look, he blew his inheritance. Yours is still there. Son, if you're worried about the money, don't be." According to the provision of the law, the younger son got a third of the estate, the older son got two-thirds of the estate. Because upon the death of the father the oldest son would become the patriarch and he would oversee not only the immediate, but also the extended family, so he'd have to look after

and tend to the extended family.

So he says, "Son, yeah, he blew his inheritance. Your two-thirds is still there. I haven't touched any of that. And it's all yours. It's all yours. And if you want to be generous with your brother, feel free, but it's your money, you make the decision. I don't care about the money. I just want my sons and I want us to be a family."

And he says it was, quote, "Fitting to celebrate and be glad." "Son, it's the right thing to do." This is what the heart of the father is. And the religious son says, "No. No. I will not rejoice at the return of he who rebelled. I will not! I will not join in this celebration. I will not submit to your request. I will not enter the home. I will not reconcile with my brother."

WHICH ARE YOU, REBELLIOUS OR RELIGIOUS?

We've got two sons, the rebellious and the religious. My question to you is this: which are you? Every one of us tends to lean one direction or the other. Some of us, we lean rebellious. Others of us lean religious. Let me unpack this a bit for you.

Rebellion is about innovation. New lifestyle, new sexuality, new culture, new day. "I'm not going to be bound by the past. Things are different now. It's the twenty-first century." They were saying that in the first century too.

Religion is about tradition. "This is the way we've always done things. We need to keep our customs and traditions." People who are religious like to say things like, "I wish we could just get back to the good old days." Ecclesiastes says, "Do not ask, 'Why were the old days better than these?' It's foolish to ask that question." Fifty years ago, there was sin. Five hundred years ago, there was sin. Five thousand years ago, there was sin.

Rebellion is about nonconformity. "I'm not going to abide by the cultural presuppositions and standards," right? Nonconformity. Urban, arty, indie culture says, "It's all about self-expression, nonconforming." So it's alternative sexuality and alternative spirituality and alternative political ideology because it's all about expression, like that's a good thing. Because it's not.

It's just nonconformity, whereas religion is all about conformity. "Play by the rules. Make sure you do what's best for everyone. Don't stick out." You know, "Dress the same, act the same, live the same. Don't be a unique individual."

Rebellion breaks the rules. All right, that's the rebellious son. He breaks the rules.

Religion is about keeping the rules. And that's exactly what the religious son says, "Dad, I've never," he literally says this, "I've never broken any rules. When we were kids, you gave us a chore chart and every day I've checked every box for every chore. And he didn't! I'm the good kid, he's the bad kid. I keep the rules, he breaks the rules."

Rebellion tends to be liberal. For some of you, that's a good word. You like that word. "Liberal, that's me. I'm liberal." For some of you, you say, "That's a very bad word." That's because you're conservative, right? For some of you, "conservative" is a very bad word.

Religion tends to be conservative. Religious people, they always take the conservative side. Rebellious people always take the liberal side. And they fight and they argue. That's why we have two political parties and two kinds of talk radio. And the rebellious criticize the religious, and the religious criticize the rebellious.

Rebellion tends to be immoral. You can look at the rebellious son; it's obvious he's immoral. The guy with a whole group of women that are going to his condo to drink and be up all night breaking commandments, he's not fooling anybody. He's not even trying. You log on to his Facebook account, click photos, it's pretty clear what's been going on.

The religious guy, he's moral. He's really—he's a moral guy. He's up early, to bed late, works hard, never cheats, keeps the rules, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke. He is clean living. Very moral.

Rebellion is about being disobedient. So the rebellious son, he disobeys his father, he disobeys God.

The religious son, he's all about being obedient. "I obey. You tell me to do something, I do it." Very compliant.

Rebellion ultimately is about being lazy. Some of you call it being an artist. It's really just lazy. Because artists will say, "I work when I'm inspired," which is a very creative way of saying, "I'm lazy." All right, now, the rebellious son, he's lazy. He takes all his dad's money, but he doesn't go out and earn his own. He doesn't invest his dad's money, he blows it. He's lazy.

Religion is about working hard and that's exactly what the religious son says. "Dad, I've worked very, very, very, very hard. I'm very hard-working."

Rebellion, the sin is visible. It's obvious. The guy's lost weight, strung out, on his way to rehab, and can't find shoes. It's visible.

In religion, the sin is invisible. It's not out there, it's in here. He's got pride and self-righteousness and a critical spirit in his heart.

Rebellion uses people, just like this son used his dad. He just used him for the money. Those of you who are rebellious, you use people. You want your parents, family, friends, coworkers, boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, church, government to just pick up your mess and pay your tab. You use people.

Religious people don't use people, they judge people. "You're stupid, you're lazy, you're an idiot, you're not as good as me." That's exactly what the

religious son does.

Rebellion is unrighteous. It's just unrighteous. Religion is self-righteous. Rebellion is, "I'm my own person and I express myself and I'm a free spirit and I'm unique and I don't play by the rules and I do what I feel and I'm true to myself." And it's unrighteous.

And religion comes along and says, "And I'm better than those people and I'm smarter than those people and I'm harder working and more compliant and I make a better contribution to society. They ruin everything and I'm the one holding it together." They're self-righteous.

And the only thing in the story that the rebellious and the religious son hold in common? They're both using the father. Neither of them is loving him. The rebellious son uses the father to go sin, and when it actually comes down to where the father is looking the religious son in the eye, saying, "Son, please, come into the house, reconcile with your brother, make your father happy. Let's do the gospel here." He says, "No, Dad. I was just using you to build an economic empire. I was using you to build my resume. I was using you to build my legacy and now, Dad, that you want me to love you? The answer is no." Both sons were using the father. They were just using him in different ways. Neither of them loved him. Neither of them loved him.

My question to you is this: which are you? Rebellious or religious? Are you more rebellious or religious? When your heart inclines one way or the other, which direction does it go?

And during the course of your life these need not be mutually exclusive. I have seen some people who are really rebellious all of a sudden become really religious. All of a sudden they're like, "I can't believe they're wearing that, smoking that, drinking that, acting like that. I used to do that yesterday and I am mortified by their behavior." It's like, "Really? Really? You flipped so quick."

I've seen just the opposite, where people are really religious. Conservative church, conservative home, conservative schooling, conservative politics, very, very conservative. And sometimes it's even like this guy. They hit a certain age, they move out of their parents' house, rebellious. They make up for lost time. They go far fast. They lose their mind.

Which are you? Which way does your heart incline? Rebellion or religion? Now, I'll tell you about me. And I think it's important that we're all honest and I want you to be honest with your family, friends, your community group, your own kids. Okay, now me, I use myself as an example. Do you think I'm more prone toward rebellion or religion? Religion. Even when I rebel, it's only considered rebellion by those who are more religious than me.

Here's my story. I'll tell you my story. God didn't save me till I was nineteen years of age, a freshman in college. Before that, I grew up in a neighborhood that I would say was rebellious. I grew up down in SeaTac by the airport, some of you know my story, before it was incorporated as a city. So if you have an airport without a police force and everybody flies in anonymous, it's going to go bad. Right, it's the days of the judges. Everybody does right in his own eyes, it's really bad. And so we had strip clubs and prostitutes and the Green River Killer and Ted Bundy and we found murdered women at our Little League fields and it was like the Wild West. It was a little crazy, and that's the neighborhood I grew up in.

As well, in this rebellious neighborhood, there weren't any fathers. I was one of the only kids with a dad. My dad hung sheetrock to feed five kids until he broke his back. And my dad goes to Mars Hill now and it's really cool to see what God's done in my family. But I decided I was going to be the good kid. I was jack, marginal Catholic. Some Catholics love Jesus, I wasn't one of them. I just thought, "There is a God. You be a good person." That's basically it, general religion, right? Those are the two underpinnings of religion: there is a God, he wants you to be good, so do it. That's religion.

So for me, I never drank. I never drank. To this day I've never had even a puff of a cigarette. Some of you say, "It's not a sin." I just don't think it's healthy, all right? And the evidence is on my side. To this day I have never done any drugs in my whole life, even weed. I started having drugs offered to me when I was as young as nine or ten. That's when I first remember being offered all kinds of drugs and I said no every single time.

So I was the very, you know, "good kid." Good grades, in high school, student body president, most likely to succeed, man of the year, editor of the school paper, four-year letterman in baseball. Every time there was a dance, like a prom or homecoming or a tolo, I always got a crown on my head and I was the king. That was me. They made me a "natural helper," which was where I would counsel other students, which is ridiculous. And I wasn't a Christian but I was the good kid.

Now I'll share something with you. And I'll show this to you. This is my letterman's jacket from high school. Okay? Now what does it say on the back? Mr. Driscoll. Okay now, let me explain this to you. I decided I was part of the faculty. Not a student, part of the faculty. So I thought, "Everyone else here is just drunken and stupid. I'll be one of the adults." And so I literally put Mr. Driscoll on the back of my letterman's jacket in my freshman year. I don't know why you're laughing. I was very helpful as part of the faculty. And so I just felt I was morally superior to everyone. "I'm a good person. Don't drink, don't smoke, don't do drugs, don't beat people unless they deserve it." I was a very good person. And then people would try to take me to youth group. "Oh, you need to meet Jesus!" "Why?" "He'll take away your sin." "I don't have sin. I'm a good person. I'm a moral person. I'm a decent person," right? I mean, like, "I have crowns."

And then I was reading the Bible that Gracie gave me when I was in college and I realized, ah, religion's a sin. Self-righteousness is a sin. Ah, living your life apart from your father is the worst sin of all. Pretending like you don't need him and in your heart you really don't love him. Oh, my gosh, I'm religious. I'm really religious. Like, non-Christian religious. And those are the guys who murdered God. And most religious people just don't see it that way. So my heart is to incline toward religion, to incline toward religion.

THE THIRD SON

So we look at the story, rebellious, religious. How many of you are rebellious? How many of you are religious? And the question is, well, who should

we be? Some of you have tried both. There's a third son in the story. It's actually the son who tells the story. He's the key to the whole story. He's not the rebellious son. He never did sin. He's not the religious son. He's the Son of God. His name is Jesus. And yes, Jesus is friends with those who are rebellious. But he never does sin. And he's actually friends with those who are religious, but he's not religious. The religious people are going to put him to death and he's going to die for their sin and the sin of the rebellious. Jesus Christ is God become a man. He is our big brother. He is the Son of God.

At this point in Luke's gospel, starting in chapter 9 verse 51, it says, "He set his face toward Jerusalem." So Jesus, the Son of God, our big brother, he's on a mission to get to Jerusalem and to die on a cross in our place for our sins to pay our debt. And he rises to give us new life. And so we all start like the rebellious son, like the religious son. But because of Jesus we can be like the third son. Jesus Christ is how the Father runs to us. He's how the Father embraces us. He's how the Father kisses us. He's how the Father blesses us. He's how the Father adopts us into his family. He actually clothes us with a robe of his righteousness. And the meal that we'll eat with the Father at the end of time, the great feast to end all feasts, will be a table set by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our big brother.

And I tell it to you all the time but I need to tell you again because it's so important. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who knew no sin to become sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Martin Luther calls that the Great Exchange. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he goes to the cross, and there's this great exchange. He takes upon himself all of our sin. For those of you who are rebellious, all of your rebellion. For those of us, I include myself, who are religious, all of our religion. And he invites us to put to death, in his death, our rebellion and our religion. Some of you, this will shock you because you thought the only two options were rebellion or religion. No, there's a third option, Jesus Christ. Having our rebellion and religion put to death through his death, as he rises from death he gives us his righteousness.

So now just like the rebellious son who stands before the father empty handed and shoeless, and he's given this grace, we receive this gracious gift of the righteousness, the perfect Spirit-filled life of obedience of Jesus Christ. The result is we get to live a new life because the Son of God takes away our sin, gives us his righteousness, to live a life that is holy but is humble and is helpful toward others and has a heart of compassion like the father and runs to those who are repentant like the father did and embraces and kisses and welcomes and graces them and is generous toward them to extend the love of the Father that's been given to us. My hope, my prayer is that you would run home to the Father, those of you who are rebellious and those of us who are religious.

Father God, thank you. Thank you that we get to use the word "Father." Of all the words that you could have chosen to reveal yourself to us, what a magnificent word that is. A father, a dad. Father God, for those of us who are rebellious I pray that you would send the Holy Spirit to convince us that if we turn around and head home, you're waiting. You're willing to run, to smile, to have compassion, to embrace, to keep kissing, and to bless. Father God, I pray that today the rebellious would return home to their Dad. God, for those of us who are religious, we have a hard time rejoicing. Grace makes us angry. We like to judge. We don't like to love. We have a hard time with emotion and celebration. I pray God that you too would send the Holy Spirit to those of us who are religious so that we might share in your joy, Father, and celebrate your grace in the other members of the family. And God, thank you that you don't turn sinners who are rebellious into the self-righteous who are religious, that you call us both to repent of our rebellion and our religion and come to Jesus, the Son of God, who makes a new way, a way of holiness by grace through faith that leads to humility and love for others and a great joy in the presence of the Father. Amen.

[End of Audio]

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.