

A Father and His Three Sons (Part 3)

Insights into our Mission as a Church

Introduction

The Text

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." . . .

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.'" (Luke 15:1-2, 11-32)

Embodying Our Mission Statement

- A. We're going to spend one more week here looking at this, perhaps, most famous of all Jesus' parables. In the previous two weeks we've looked at each of the two sons somewhat in isolation.
- B. Now, this morning we are going to do something a bit different. I'm always thinking about our mission statement as a church. I think it's biblical. I think it taps into the very heart of God for the human race in general and the church in particular.

1. So I'm always trying to live in light of it, preach in light of it, minister in light of it, and so forth. I see it all over the Scriptures. I'm always, whether directly or indirectly, wanting to move us towards it.
- C. But every now and then we come to a text that just embodies it perfectly. And I think this parable is one of those texts. And I want to hit pause and just help us settle down into it a little deeper.
1. I don't want our mission statement to merely be written on our website, our bulletins, our invite cards, or whatever. I want it to be written on our hearts. I want you to be able to see and feel and get in your bones what the mission of this church really is—the mission that God is calling us into, the reason we're here. And I think this parable can help move us towards that.
- D. So our mission statement, you remember, is: *"Mercy Hill Church exists to help restore us to God, neighbor, and city through the good news of Jesus Christ."*
1. You can probably see the way it naturally breaks down there into three parts. The good news of Jesus, or the gospel, restores us: (1) To God—a right relationship with Him; (2) To Neighbor—a right relationship with each other that begins here in the church; and (3) To City—a right relationship with the world around us, a sense of purpose and joy in the place which we inhabit.
- E. Now, again, each of these three parts, I think are wonderfully pictured for us in this parable. And I want to use this parable to help us grasp a bit more what it means for us to live this out together.

(1) Restoring Us to God: Entering into the Father's Party

Estranged from God

- A. So the first piece, then, is this idea of Restoring Us to God—or, if I were to utilize the imagery of this parable, I might say it's this idea of Entering into the Father's Party.
- B. For both the younger and older sons here, the issue is getting them back home and bringing them into this party with their Dad—with God.
1. This parable is describing really the estrangement all humanity is experiencing from God because of sin. We all are lost, we all are exiled, we all are estranged from God, and we all desperately need to get back home, but we don't know how.

2 Observations

- A. Now, on this point I want to bring out a couple of observations:

(1) We Must Repent Not Only of Our Whats but Also, and Especially, of Our Whys

- A. I'll explain what I mean by this in a moment, but, first, recall with me that, while the younger and older sons are both lost here, they are lost in two very different ways.

1. The younger son's estrangement from the Father is obvious. It's flagrant. He's asking for his inheritance early—saying to his Dad in essence: "I wish you were already dead." He's wasting it all on luxury and prostitutes and whatever else the world has to offer. Here is what we typically think of when we think of a person who is "lost".
 2. But we came to see that the older son is no less lost, though his estrangement from the Father is not as easily discerned. While the younger son "took a journey into a far country" (v. 13), the older son stays at home and he's busy working faithfully "in the field" (v. 25). He stays right by his Father's side. He does all that the Father asks. He's the good boy. He reads His Bible every morning. He's at church every Sunday. He tithes religiously.
 - a. But, underneath it all, he's not doing these things because he loves his Father, he's doing these things because he loves his Father's stuff and this is his way of trying to get at it: "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" (v. 29).
 - i. So, in this sense, the younger and the older are truly no different at all. They both have their hearts set not on God but on money and goods and worldly pleasure. They both are equally estranged, exiled from the Father in their sin.
- B. Now, it's for this reason I say, that if we are to be restored to God, if we are to enter the Father's party, we have to repent not only of our whats but also, and especially, of our whys.
1. Think with me. We like to repent of our whats. We say sorry for things we've done. We repent of our behaviors, the things externally that weren't right. "I shouldn't have told that lie; I shouldn't have stolen that money; I apologize for losing my patience; I'm sorry for looking at that website." These are the whats. And we should, we need to repent of them.
 - a. But what we have to realize is that underneath the whats are our whys—the reasons we do what we do. And these are important to consider too. Why did I tell that lie? What was I wanting? What was my heart set on instead of Jesus?
- C. And this really takes us to the heart of the matter. It's the importance of this piece that the story of the estranged older son brings out. Because you see, he really didn't have any whats to repent of. Externally he was looking great—obedient, working hard, and so forth.
1. But inside, he was perhaps even further away from his Father than the younger. His reasons for doing the good were all bad, corrupt, twisted. His whats looked fine, but his whys were all wrong!
- D. If we are to be restored to God, we need to learn to repent at this level. The danger, when we only repent of our whats is we actually only move from the younger son lostness to older son lostness.
1. We move from self-indulgence to self-righteousness. We move from license to legalism. We clean ourselves up externally, but our hearts have not been cleansed by the blood of

Christ and touched by the Spirit. We've not yet truly encounter grace and been transformed by it from the inside out.

E. I think this is particularly a danger in our parenting.

1. We get really embarrassed if our kids have younger son lostness. They look really bad and everyone can see it.
2. But, if we're honest, older son lostness doesn't seem as concerning. They look good. People tell us how awesome our kids are. They say sir and ma'am. They say please and thank you. They come to church in ties and dresses. They can recite verses from the Bible. How wonderful.
 - a. But why are they doing it? Is it because it feels good to get praise? Is it because you shamed them into obedience, or bribed them, and they know after church if they're good they get ice cream cones? Or have they met with Jesus? Are they transformed by grace and in love with Him?
 - i. That's what I mean by repenting of our whats and our whys. We don't just want to move from younger to older son lostness. We want to come back home to God!

(2) We Must Receive the Free Offer of Grace However Impossible or Offensive It May Seem

A. Now, if you recall, the younger son was trying to make that shift from younger to older son lostness. We see that in what he was rehearsing to himself there in vv. 17-19: "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.'"

1. The idea here is: "I need to pay God back for what I've done. I've been bad, now, to make it up to Him, I need to be good. If I want blessing I'll have to work for it—I'll have to be like the older son, work in the field, do that sort of thing."
 - a. And this is how a lot of us approach Christianity. We can't imagine that the Father would freely, and even extravagantly, receive us back after all that we've done. But He does. However impossible it may seem to us, He does!
- B. I made this point a couple weeks ago by pointing you to what I called The Invited Interruption. When this younger son finally gets a chance to speak to his Dad, he starts to recite what he'd been rehearsing, but before he can get to that part about working for him as a hired servant instead of a son, the Father interrupts him.
1. Now, I didn't point out last time, something I found very interesting here. You remember that behind our English New Testaments, there are countless manuscripts in the Greek from scribes that have passed these things on. And, of course, there are some minor variations in

these manuscripts because everything was done by hand, and scholars have their ways of bringing it all together for us. But, interestingly, some of the manuscripts, standing behind [v. 21](#) (your Bible might even footnote this) actually include the last words of the son in them. They omit the interruption, in other words. They complete his thought.

- a. And the general consensus on this is that it is far more likely that the Scribes added this rather than omitted it. It is likely they thought it an error in the one they were copying and so added it in down here. “The boy meant to say it. Surely he did say it, right?”

- i. Wrong! The boy meant to say it . . . but the Father wouldn’t let him!

C. And you need to hear that. Some of us really need to let the Father interrupt us. We could talk for hours about our failures and sins. We make plans to recover and pay back.

1. Let me tell you something, sometimes, when my daughters do something wrong, they come to me later with money—like a few coins from their piggy bank or whatever. What’s that? Have you seen this? It’s because the human heart knows that sin is wrong and that their needs to be payment for it.

D. And we do this, not just with each other, but with God. Because of your sin, you feel like you owe Him. Well, let me tell you: you are right! But the wonder of the gospel is that Jesus paid Him back in full for you.

E. But where grace seems impossible to the younger son, it seems offensive to the older.

1. I said last time that the offer of free grace in Jesus is too good to be true for the Prodigals and too bad to be true for the Self-Righteous.
2. The former would say: “I’m too filthy for this.” The latter would say: “I’m too clean for this.”
3. For the prodigal it’s too flattering: “I don’t deserve this to be called your son.” For the religious it’s too demeaning: “I don’t need your handouts, but I do want my wages. I don’t need you to wash me. I need you to pay me.”

F. But one of the most important lessons we can take away from this parable is this (are you ready?): Your sin is not so bad that it can keep you from God and your righteousness is not so good that it can get you to Him.

1. We need to repent of both and receive the free offer of grace in Jesus. He alone is our ticket into the Father’s party. It is through the good news of Jesus Christ alone that we can be restored to God. So we’re a church that holds to the gospel with all of our might. If we lose that, we lose everything!

(2) Restoring Us to Neighbor: Sitting with the Father’s Family

Estranged from One Another

- A. Now I belabor this first point because it sets up the next two. You see this grace is going to transform, not just the way we relate to God, but the way we relate to neighbor as well. If we were to utilize the imagery of this parable again to restate this second part of our mission statement, we might say that restoring us to neighbor is akin to sitting with the Father's family. We're not just entering His party, we're in His family—with brothers and sisters sitting with us around the table.
 - 1. Here I have in view particularly the way the gospel creates a new community in the church as God's family.
- B. One of the things this parable makes clear is that our sin has estranged us not just from God but from each other. These two sons are not just at odds with their father, right? They are at odds with each other.
 - 1. This is particularly brought out for us in the way the older son is depicted there—protesting on the porch, refusing to come into the party and sit around the table with his younger brother. You remember, he won't even refer to him as his brother at all anymore: ["But when this son of yours . . ." \(v. 30\)](#). "He may be your son, but he's not my brother."
 - a. Enmity. It's what's characterized human relationships from the beginning, and yet, suddenly, in Christ, something new is offered. The two that were formerly at odds with one another are invited to sit down around the table together and celebrate the grace of God.

2 Observations

- A. There are two quick things I want to bring out regarding our church family at this point:

(1) It's Going to Get Awkward at Times

- A. If you're just in the world, you get to hang out with people like you, people you naturally get along with, you're into the same things, you have the same personality types or whatever.
 - 1. But in the church you are brought together and suddenly made family with all manner of folks, some like you, some very different.
- B. And this is pictured for us with this idea of the older and younger sons coming together as brothers and sitting around the table with each other. I mean you have to imagine this moment. You know they're going to be tempted to despise the other. You know they're going to struggle to get the other. You know they're going to want to judge and look down on the other.
 - 1. The younger son is going to be tempted to look at the older and think: "He's too clean and perfect, he's all about the rules, the goody two shoes, it's obnoxious. He doesn't really have a testimony. I always feel judged when I'm around him. I don't get him. I'd rather not spend time with him. He just makes me feel guilty, stupid."

2. And the older son is going to be tempted to look at the younger and think: “He’s too careless, reckless, he can’t be trusted, he’s messy, he’s saying things that make me uncomfortable, he’s come out of a lifestyle that frightens me. He’s still got all these rough edges. Every now and then he cusses and makes these inappropriate jokes. I don’t really want to sit around the table with him.”
- C. But the cross of Christ crushes both kinds of sons to the ground and, from the wreckage of ego and self-centeredness, He creates a new community, a new family in its place, where, in spite of all the differences, we come to find that there is a fundamental similarity that keeps it all together. We are both sinners. We both need grace. And we’ve both found it in Jesus!
1. So sometimes it’s going to get awkward. You’re going to be with people way different than you. You won’t understand them. You’ll step on toes and things. But the grace of Christ helps us absorb any offense, sustain our commitment, and it ultimately remakes the culture of our community—we become family.

(2) It's Going to Get Costly at Times

- A. If we want community the way God designed it’s going to come at a cost. So many people come into church thinking it’s just going to cater to their needs, and then they’re surprised when they find it’s actually going to cost them something. It can be hard.
- B. So for this, I want you to recognize that one of the reasons why the older son is so mad when his younger brother returns and his dad is throwing this party for him, killing the fattened calf and things, is that this whole party is coming at cost to him.
1. What I mean is, the younger son had already taken and wasted his share of the inheritance. It’s gone. All that remained was to be inherited by the older son. That means, all the resources the father is here putting into celebrating the return of his younger son have actually taken from that which would have otherwise been that of his older son. No wonder the older brother is fuming. This party is costing him!
- C. And in this we have a picture of what it really will take to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ. It will not be easy. It will cost us. You will be called to press in even though it hurts. You will be called to forgive even when you want to run away. You will be called to sacrifice even when all you want to do is save yourself.
- D. But, of course, in all of this, our sacrifices are nothing like what Christ our true older brother—“[the firstborn among many brothers](#)” (Rom 8:29)—sacrificed for us. He forfeited not just a portion but all of His inheritance, indeed, even His very life, so that we might be restored to His Father and, through that, to one another.

(3) Restoring Us to City: Participating in the Father’s Pursuit

Our Grand Purpose

- A. In this parable, one of the most meaningful images of all is that of this pursuing Father. And when we look closely, what is particularly striking is that it is not just the younger, prodigal that He is in pursuit of, but the older, religious son as well. Both had severely shamed Him, and wounded Him in their own way, but neither could so sin against him that it would quench his love.
1. So the Prodigal, who wished his dad dead, is coming back smelling like swine, and the Father, who catches sight of him from the house is off in a flash and embracing him, filth and all.
 2. And the older son, who's been working not in love for the Father but in love for the Father's stuff, the one who publicly shames the Father by disowning his brother and refusing to enter the party, God doesn't leave that boy on the porch. He goes out and entreats him to come in. He pursues both boys with equal vehemence and love.
- B. And you know, such is the purpose of the church. This idea of restoring us to city is the idea of restoring us to what we are really here for. Too often we make it about our careers, or our little families, or our comforts, or our bank accounts, and we miss it.
1. We are here to participate in the Father's pursuit of His lost children. That is the grand purpose of the church.
- C. This last week, I was reacquainted with the challenging words of Jack Miller on this point: *"The command to go to the nations with the gospel is not one command among many; it is the master command of Jesus the Master. If we do not obey this command, we are living out of accord with our whole reason for being in this world"* (The Heart of a Servant Leader, p. 313).
- D. If we feel *"out of accord"* in our lives, perhaps this is the point to consider. What are we doing if we are not doing this?
1. Listen, when you lose sight of this grand purpose, then everything you put your hands to starts to feel empty, mundane, vanity.
 2. But when you regain this sense of mission and calling, that you are put here as an extension of the Father's pursuit, spreading invitation to the Father's party in Christ, then even your most menial tasks start to sparkle with new possibility. You are not just going to the grocery store—you are rubbing shoulders in line with lost children of God. You are not just changing diapers—you are nurturing little ones towards the gospel of Jesus. You are not just punching a time card and putting in your 9 to 5—you are working with integrity, developing relationships, and calling people to consider the free offer of grace in Jesus.

A Good Meal Lingering Long into the Night

- A. For Jesus, if you noticed, one of the things we see often with Him is He's never just simply eating a meal. Whenever He's around the table with others, He's always doing great commission work! His pursuit of people looks like a good meal lingering long into the night.

1. We've pointed this out numerous times in Luke's gospel. And it's here in the context of our parable again. Why are the Pharisees and scribes so worked up and upset in vv. 1-2? Because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners again. He's always around the table with these folks.
 - a. This is the way Jesus lives on mission for God. He clears enough room in His schedule to eat with people. To ask questions. To hear their stories. To touch their hearts meaningfully with the message of the gospel and the grace of God.
- B. This is one of the ways we can start to engage this mission as well. I feel like I'm always reading to you from Tim Chester's *A Meal with Jesus*. But I don't care. It's that good. I want to read you another excerpt this morning now as we draw things to a close: "People often complain that they lack time for mission. But we all have to eat. Three meals a day, seven days a week. That's twenty-one opportunities for mission and community without adding anything to your schedule. You could meet up with another Christian for breakfast on the way to work—read the Bible together, offer accountability, pray for one another. You could meet up with colleagues at lunchtime. . . . You could invite your neighbors over for a meal. Better still, invite them over with another family from church. That way you get to do mission and community at the same time; plus your unbelieving neighbors will get to see the way the gospel impacts our relationship as Christians. You could invite someone who lives alone to share your family meal and follow it with board games, giving your children an opportunity to serve others through their welcome. Francis Schaeffer says: 'Don't start with a big program. Don't suddenly think that you can add to your church budget and begin. Start personally and start in your home. I dare you. I dare you in the name of Jesus Christ. Do what I am going to suggest. Begin by opening your home for community. . . . [T]here is no place in God's world where there are no people who will come and share a home as long as it is a real home'" (p. 92).
- C. What I love about this vision for living on mission through meals is that it is simultaneously inspiring and attainable.
 1. Listen, you can begin this sort of missional lifestyle even this week! It's summertime. You can invite your unbelieving neighbors over for a barbecue. You can! And you can ask them questions about their life and get to know their story. And as you start to learn of their joys and fears and struggles and needs, you can start to bring the gospel meaningfully to them in word and deed.
 - a. In other words: you too can participate in the Father's pursuit.
- D. That's why God has you in this city. That's why we're here as a church. "Mercy Hill Church exists to help restore us to God, neighbor, and city through the good news of Jesus Christ!"