

U-Turn to the Father

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Scripture Reading: Luke 15: 11-32

And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' so he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 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 became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

Heavenly Father, touch us through Your Spirit so that the words of Your Son may come alive to us this morning, that we may know what to do with it, so that it can transform our own lives, for we pray this in His name. Amen.

This is a fairly well known passage of Scripture for those who have been in church for any length of time or even in Sunday school. This morning, I had a few things that I would like to mine from this story and present to you, because it is important for us as sons and daughters of God.

The story centers on the prodigal son who asks his father for his inheritance and then goes away and spends it all. When it all ends, it so happens that a famine occurred in the country and he had no money to buy food or to take care of himself. So he goes out and gets the only job available – looking after pigs. The Bible says that he would have readily eaten the food that the pigs were given; but even that was not given to him. He was in a state of

desperation. In that moment when he had reached the very bottom, the realization struck him that the servants in his father's house had food to eat, and here he was a servant with nothing to eat. As that thought came to him, he says to himself, "I will arise and go back to my father. I will arise!"

It was an act of the will, of his volition, because it was his will that took him away from his father's house. It was the things of the flesh, the allurements that he thought he would indulge in, the freedom that he thought he would experience that made him leave the comfort and the security and stability of his father's home. And out in this far country, far away from that security, he recognizes that even the lowest in the hierarchy in his father's home had more, and better, things to eat than he had. So his will gets in again, and he says, "I will arise and go to my father."

As I read this I realized that sometimes there are many who fall into this very category. There are many who leave the Father and wander away thinking that their will is better than the will of the Father, that somehow the Father is short-changing them, that they've got to look out for themselves. So they go off. Maybe, there are some of you sitting here who say, "Well, that's me! I'll wander away from him." And maybe, you've not gone off and spent your time with prostitutes or other things. Maybe it's just that you've wandered away from God in your mind. It's been a long time since you've had a conversation with Him. It's been a while since you've read the Word of God, and you'll know that it's been a long time since you were in a position that you need to be with Him.

For those who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, the place where you find yourself in right now is a place of barrenness. It's a place where there is no fruit; it's a place where there is no joy; and it's a place where you are hungry and thirsty. Maybe you don't know what to do in that place, and were wishing that you could go back, wishing that you'd never left.

The good news for us is in the next part of this chapter which talks about how ready God is to receive you, for the Bible says that the father was actually waiting, looking out for him; that when he was far away, his father spotted him. Instead of waiting for him to come, he ran to him, to embrace him and bring him home. All it took was for the son to reach that point where he said, "I will arise and go to my father."

I wonder whether there are some of you seated here who are saying that is precisely what you need to do. You are in a faraway place. Maybe you are just busy doing everything that you think you ought to be doing, but the connection with Him is not there. Or maybe, Satan has come by and whispered to you and said, "You're done! You've walked away from Him and you are caught up in this sin and there is no way back to Him."

Beloved, the good news is that in our faith, we are allowed U-turns. We are allowed to turn around and come back. The only criterion for that is for us to realize that we have done wrong. *If we confess our sins, then He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* That's all it takes – to be able to confess and say, "Lord, I took a wrong turn. I let my will override yours and I'm out in this far country. I've left my joy and peace and all those wonderful things that I remember, but now I don't have.

Maybe this morning you need to say – I will arise and go back. And see what the father does! He welcomes him. The son is ready to lower himself and says, "Treat me as your hired servant. I've sinned against you." But the father hushes him and says, "Get the robe, get the

ring, get sandals; for this my son was dead and is not alive, was lost and is now found. And it's all that matters. He's come home."

Jesus was talking very particularly to the scribes and the Pharisees. The beginning of the chapter places it in context: *Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable.*

Because they had a problem with the way that He was embracing sinners, Jesus made a point by telling them that angels rejoice in heaven. 3:7 *"I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."* Heaven rejoices when somebody comes home.

The father says, "You're not a slave, you're not a servant; you are my son. Put the ring back on his finger, put the robe on his shoulders, put sandals on his feet for this my son was lost but is not found. He has come home! We've got to rejoice, we've got to celebrate." That is what awaits you when you come home. Wherever you are, there's rejoicing that accompanies a U-turn, when you come back to God.

I would like to bring a sub-point to this. The prodigal son knew that home was a place that he could return to. I want to ask you as parents (or even grandparents): Do your children know the way home? When they get to a place where there is no more hope, do they know enough of the Word to know that they can come home and they will be welcomed? Many times I have related this story of a time when we were pastoring a church in the US. A man came into the church one day. He had been an alcoholic for over twenty-one years. Then one day, he drove off the road and landed up in hospital. That's when he realized that he got his life back and so came to church. He was so hungry for the Word; he grew and grew and he actually became our Sunday school superintendent. But, for the twenty-five years that he was an alcoholic, his son grew up without direction. He was arrested for every juvenile crime that he could be arrested for. He was completely wayward. This father would cry when he talked about his son, saying, "I knew how to come back home, but my son doesn't. My parents made sure that I went to Sunday school and I learnt the Bible. So I knew how to come back, but my son doesn't." so beloved, I ask you – Are you doing enough to make sure that your children know the way home?

I have been doing confirmation classes for twenty-one years now, and some of the saddest moments that I have in my classes amidst the enormous joy, is when I ask one of the kids to turn to a particular book of the Bible and they don't know whether to look in the Old Testament or the New Testament. It's not that they are not taught that in Sunday school. They are! I recognize immediately that they are children of parents who are irregular in church, and who don't even bother to know whether the kids are in Sunday school or not. I feel so sad when that is the message that is passed on to the children – that it's not important. During exam times, some of you take them out of church so that they can go for classes or study a little more. I say to you: Don't do that! You are looking at it circumstantially, but it's a terrible principle to pass on to your children because what you are inherently communicating is that when times get tough, it's easiest to take God out of the equation. And what they learn is that one should try and handle the difficult times by oneself rather than relying on God who really is the only one who can make the situation better.

We have a responsibility to our children. At the time of their dedication, we ask the parents, "Will you so model the Scriptures for them that when the time comes for them to make a

choice, they will automatically choose the God of the Bible? Will prayer be the first recourse to any adverse situation in the family?" that's what a Christian home should look like. I ask you: do your children know the way home? If they ever get lost when they grow up, will they know the way home?

It seems that till now the Pharisees must have been okay. Jesus had explained about the sinners and for once, He is leaving them out of the picture. Then He begins to paint a picture of the Pharisees through the eyes of the older brother. When the older brother came home and heard the music, he didn't go in to find out what had happened, but he called one of the servants to know the reason for the celebration. The servant tells him, "Your brother has come back. Your father brought in the fattened calf, cut it and he is celebrating."

He gets angry. The father comes out and pleads with him, saying, "Son, come in; your brother was dead and now is alive, was lost and now he's found. We've got to celebrate!" But the brother said, "Look! I've stayed with you. I've been obedient to you. And you have never given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son (not even 'my brother') came, he who was off prostituting your wealth, you killed the fattened calf for him." And he refuses to come in.

That's where the Pharisees were, because for them, holiness had to do with behavior. It had nothing to do with the way they were thinking. If they did what was visibly right, then they were okay. Yet, Jesus changed that equation, didn't he? In the sermon on the mount, he says, "*You have been told that you shall not commit adultery; but I say to you, even if you think with lust about a woman, you have already committed adultery.*" And yet, their thoughts were so against anybody coming to God.

That's possibly a place where we too can land if we are not careful – we do not like the fact that God can forgive someone who has done something wrong, and we hold that grudge for God even though God has forgotten and forgiven. But we still hold it. We wonder how that could happen; it was not right. Yet it was God's promise. It was the father's problem.

This is exactly how Jonah thought. God told him, "Go to Nineveh because there is tremendous amount of sin in that place and I want to bring judgment upon them." And Jonah heads off to Tarshish. When God finally brings him to Nineveh, he goes and preaches. The people repent, and God relents. In chapter 4 of the book of Jonah, he explicitly states, "This is why I did what I did, because I knew that You are a God who is gracious, slow to anger and that You will relent and forgive. And I am the one who will stand there and say, 'God is going to do this and that,' and then you forgive. That is why I went to Tarshish. I couldn't handle the fact that You are a loving gracious God and that You might forgive them."

How often we look at that picture of Jonah and wonder how we could even think like that. But if we were to look in the mirror, we would probably see the face of Jonah. We have this judgmental, legalistic attitude that the elder brother had – unforgiving, rigid. Celebration? No way! I wonder whether some of us have that attitude as well. We say, "Lord, I will not rejoice when people who have done wrong and come back into Your kingdom. I want there to be judgment upon them."

I wonder whether this morning, you need to be able to have a picture of God in your mind's eye. If you are like the prodigal son, then in your mind's eye, you need to see the arms of the Father outstretched, waiting to embrace you. All it takes is a pivot in your mind that says, "I

will arise and go. I will return.” Repentance, not remorse. Remorse is sadness for what you have done; but you stay there feeling sad. Repentance is turning around and coming back and saying, “I will not go back to that place.”

Or maybe this morning, it’s like the elder son who has snuck up on you in your mind’s eye, showing you how alike you and he are. Maybe you need to see the Father pleading with and saying, “Let’s celebrate!” It’s a good thing when people who have done wrong recognize that they have done wrong and come and ask for forgiveness. Let’s celebrate! That’s how the kingdom works. The angels in heaven rejoice when something like this happens. Why don’t you do it as well?

So beloved, between the younger son and the elder, picture the overarching love of the Father who calls out to you and says, “Come back home.” Or, “Change your thinking, your attitude, your mindset, or whatever it is that you are tired of.”

The Lord’s Supper is a good place to come and deal with those things. One thing that I want to underscore as we come to the table is that sometimes we think that our relationship with God is broken; when we sin or we go our own way, we are no longer children of God. The truth is that if you are a part of the kingdom of God, if you have accepted Jesus as Savior, then we are sons and daughters of God. What breaks when we sin is the fellowship with God. It is not the relationship that we have as sons and daughters of God. That’s where Satan tries to drive a wedge saying, “Now you are fatherless. There is no place to go, because that relationship is broken.” It is the fellowship that has gone. It’s just like a family at home, as children and parents have a disagreement, and don’t talk to each other. The relationship is still there between parent and child, but it’s the fellowship that is broken. Beloved, it’s the fellowship that draws us closer and closer to God. Once we are sons and daughters of God, it’s the fellowship that helps us to understand the mind of God and walk in the path that God wants us to. Satan would like you to believe that you are no longer a son or daughter of God. But if that were true, then 1 John 1:9 wouldn’t be in the Bible. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* It is not a license to sin; it is a reality that God knew that we will make mistakes and He put a way back for us.

Maybe this morning, it’s a long time since you had any fellowship with God. It’s a long time since you’ve run out with Him, chatted with Him. It’s a long time since you’ve asked Him what His will and purpose is for your life. It’s a long time since you’ve had a conversation with Him. Maybe today that fellowship, that beautiful fellowship that God had with Adam and Even when he walked and talked with them in the Garden – maybe that needs to be restored. Maybe today is the day to rectify that torn fellowship, to come back home.

Let us pray: Lord, to You we come this morning. Sometimes we get so good at putting on the masks when we meet people. But deep inside Lord, we are just dry and barren, fruitless, joyless, without peace. Yet Lord, we have come. And Lord, if there are ones here who need to make a U-turn, would You prompt them to take that step and say, “I will arise and return to the sweet fellowship that I used to have, to close proximity to the God whom I love.” Maybe Lord, this morning we’ve been dealing with judgmental attitudes and mindsets, been unforgiving. We ask for forgiveness for that as well and pray that if there are some who need to do a mind shift, that you would encourage them to do that. For there can be no peace, no joy in a place that is not Your will. So Lord, as we come to this table, prepare our hearts; let our stubborn wills bind with Your holy will, that we would be malleable to the

kind of way that we ought to walk, in the kind of thinking that we need. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.