

“Give Me Mine”

The Prodigal God, Pt. 1

Last spring after speaking at a national ministers retreat in Lithuania, I carved out an opportunity to skip over the Baltic Sea and spend a couple of days in Saint Petersburg, Russia before heading home. It’s been a dream of mine since I took Russian in High School – back when the Cold War was still a thing. But it gave me the chance to see in person one of my favorite paintings of all time, by my second favorite painter of all time, the Dutch master, Rembrandt.

The Hermitage is one of the most prestigious art museums in the world, second in size only to the Louvre in Paris. It’s a massive place with an incredible collection. But I was there specifically to see *this* beauty. It’s been hanging in the church office for years, but the real thing is quite a bit bigger! You can see it in scale in these pictures. I spent close to an hour sitting in front of this painting, just taking it in.

It’s called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and it of course depicts the story of Jesus’ most famous parable. And it’s famous for a reason, I think the whole essence of true gospel-oriented Christianity is encapsulated in one little 21-verse story that Jesus told in Luke chapter 15. And we’re going to spend the next six weeks devouring it.

By the way, I don’t like the name “The Prodigal Son” and so we’re not going to use that, but I probably won’t get into that today. In fact, I’m not even going to read the story to you today – I’m just going to refer to one verse – but I would like to give you a homework assignment this week of reading it on your own. Luke 15:11-32 (of course it wouldn’t hurt you to read the whole chapter!)

Today is an introduction and so we won’t say everything about it, and there is a lot to say. Chances are you’ve heard of this story before. If you grew up around church I can probably *guarantee* you have and even if you didn’t, this is one of those Bible stories - like David and Goliath – that has made its way into the cultural lingo.

And I’d like for you to think about this story in a slightly different way that you might have in the past. I’d like you to consider that this story is giving us a picture of an **assault on community** because of **idolatry which is only overcome by agony**. That’s the theses for this whole parable - an assault on community because of idolatry which is only overcome by agony.

So first of all, this is an assault on community. Now chances are you don't see it that way and that's because we are a modern western people. But most peoples and cultures, most times in the world would look at it and realize that what this story is about is the dissolution of a family. This is about a family that is unraveling and coming apart. And the assault is coming from two directions – two fronts.

The first assault comes from the younger brother, of course. Because the younger brother comes to the father in **v.12** and says, “*Father, give me my share of the estate.*’”. Now, the older son in those days always got a double portion of what every other sibling got. And so, since there were two sons in this family, the younger brother would have had coming to him, when the father died, a third of the estate. So he was coming and asking for a third of the estate.

But the important phrase here is “when the father died”. One commentator put it like this, “In Middle Eastern culture, to ask for one's inheritance while the father was still alive is to wish him dead. A traditional Middle Eastern father can only respond in one way; he would be expected to strike the boy across the face for his insolence and drive him out of the house with verbal and physical blows.”

Dr. Kenneth Bailey is a minister and one of the world experts on Middle Eastern culture and the Bible – I am deeply indebted to his work for this whole series. Bailey spent 40 years living and teaching the New Testament in the Middle East. He would visit village after village in that part of the world and ask the peasants if anybody had ever heard of such a request as this. “Never!” They'd say.

Would anyone make such a request? “Impossible!” What would happen if they did? “The father would become furious and refuse.” In fact, Bailey recounts that in all of his travels he only heard of this happening one time and, sure enough, the father took a stick and beat his son out of the house.

The request means he wants his father to die. Everybody in the Middle East gets that instinctively. This would have been shocking to Jesus' listeners. He had their attention right from the start. They probably winced when he said it. They were waiting for the beat down. It's not that he's breaking a law. There's no law that specifically says the son must wait for his father's death. But he's breaking something worse. He's breaking a relationship. He has broken his father's heart.

Not only does he not care about his father, but he doesn't care about his family, his community. See, wealth of his village is not held in stocks and bonds. The father didn't write him check. It's in homes and animals and land – farm land. To suddenly lose a third of their assets would be devastating to the whole tribe. That's how they eat.

So this guy is just thinking about himself. This comes across in the way he makes his request. In the original language of the story, the easiest way for him to make the request would be to say, "Give me my inheritance." But that's not what he says, he literally says, "Give me the share of property that falls to me." Why the long windedness?

Because he didn't want his "inheritance." And again, understanding the Middle Eastern culture will give us some insight into this. To accept one's "inheritance" means to accept a position of leadership within the family. It means to protect the honor of the family and administer and increase the family's wealth and represent the family in the community. But that's exactly what this boy *didn't* want. He says, "Just show me the money!" He's a mess.

So the first assault comes from the younger brother, but wait, there's more! We'll see this in more detail in coming weeks, but later in the story - hope beyond hope! – in the middle of the story we see the younger

brother brought back in, the father embrace him and it looks like the family is about to be restored. And at the moment of the greatest triumph, it's the *elder* brother now who assaults the integrity of the family.

When the elder brother refuses to go in, what he's saying is, "I don't want to be part of a family like this. I'm the heir now, all of the inheritance is mine, and I refuse to let you do what you are doing. I will not be a part of a family with *him* in it." That's why there's a second crises.

And the story at the end is just as much at a crises point as it was in the beginning. Do you realize that? Because anybody that understands the family as the basic human community – and especially the listeners in that culture and in that day - got it. They would have been saying, "What is the matter with these kids?" They were both assaulting the family.

So there's a two-headed assault on the family, but what is the *cause* of it? At its heart, what is tearing this family apart? And the answer here, if we read the text carefully, is idolatry. Now, you say, "Where's the word?" Well, the word doesn't show up itself, but let me show you how this works out in the story. First of all, the younger son, for many years has been part of the family. He's obeyed the father, he's eaten with the father, he's been around the father, he's been doing what a son should do.

But *when* he says, “I’m tired of waiting for you to die, give me my money now”, it means that all along, or at least for a very, very long time, the son had actually been after the father’s *things* rather than the father. He wanted the father’s *things* more than he wanted the happiness and well-being of the father. He wanted the father’s wealth. He wanted the estate and he wanted the comfort and the prestige that comes with having that.

And he must have come to some kind of fork in the road. He must have realized that he was not going to be able to have his relationship with the father and still have the money he wanted. For a long time he was playing his cards so he could have his father *and* the money, but when it became clear that in order to use the money the way he wanted he was going to have to cut out – well, he came to a fork in the road and he chose the father’s things. Why? Because all along his *heart* had been set, not on the father, but on the father’s things.

And that, is the biblical definition of what idolatry is. Why? Do you realize you can be in church, you can read the Bible, you can pray, you can keep the Ten Commandments – in other words you can be obeying the Father and you can be singing about the Father and you can be talking to the Father...and all along have actually put your heart on the Father’s *things* rather than on the Father.

What are the father’s things? You want blessings. You want health. You want your life to go well. You want your children to be fine. You’re asking God for things – nothing wrong with that, He *wants* us to ask – but is that what you’re here for? As a pastor I’ve seen this happen many, many times. Because younger brother idolatry is so hard to recognize in ourselves. Because for a long time we can say, “Well, I’m living the life and I’m obeying God and I’m believing everything right.”

But then you come to a fork in the road. And there’s love or there’s money or there’s power or there’s status, or there’s comfort; there’s *something* you set your heart on and in order to get it you’re going to have to disobey the Father. And you say, “You know what, give me mine, I’m out of here.” And at that point it’s pretty obvious that you’ve been *using* God – using the Father - to get the Father’s things. And if there’s a choice between the two, you’ll take the things because *that’s* where your heart has been set.

Well, you say, “Well, that’s not me. I can’t identify with that because I’ve never cut out on God. Look, I’m sitting here aren’t I? I’m listening to you. Why would I waste my time on that...?” Well, there’s another kind of idolatry and it’s elder brother idolatry. You say, “What do you mean elder brother idolatry?” Let me show you something.

When the elder brother found out that the younger brother was back – you don't have to have a PHD in psychology to figure out that this is the greatest day of the father's life. When he kills the fatted calf – that would have been able to feed 75-100 people – and back in those days you almost never ate meat at a meal anyway. It was a delicacy for special occasions and festivals. So this is lavish. By killing the fatted calf, he was throwing a party for the whole village. It was probably the biggest party the village had ever seen.

It's very obvious – you lose a son like this, he comes back, you embrace him – this was the *greatest* day of the father's life. *Anybody* could see that. Even the elder brother could see it. And it didn't matter. Because all the brother could see was that now the father was deploying *his* inheritance in a way that he didn't approve of. And it clearly shows that his heart had been just as much set on the father's things as the younger brother's. Because he is furious now and he's humiliating his father on the greatest day of his life – we'll break this all down in coming weeks – but it's just awful. He's behaving shamefully and he doesn't care. Because he's not that concerned about the father's heart, he concerned about the father's *things*.

And here's what's so weird; younger brother idolatry shows itself in immorality – “I'm going to go do what I want.” But elder brother idolatry shows itself in self-righteousness and lots of anger. Because see, “The father *owes* me! I have been *good*, I have been slaving, I've obeyed the 10 Commandments, I've gone to church, I've read my Bible.” But, you see, the anger at the Father if things don't go right *shows* that you set your heart not on the Father but on the Father's thing.

You are not obeying Him because of the beauty of who He is and the worthiness of His very nature. You're not obeying Him just to resemble Him and delight in Him and please Him and be near Him. You're in it for the blessings. “I signed up for some blessings and I've been a good guy so hand it over, pops!” So there's bad boy idolatry and there's good boy idolatry, see? But both destroy community and they are destroying this family – just tearing it to pieces.

Now, how is it that idolatry tears apart community? Why is it? And there's no better expositor of this than Saint Augustine. He's the original. You may have heard me reference Martin Luther or Jonathan Edwards or whoever, but it all comes from St. Augustine. He lived in Africa in the late 300's and early 400's AD. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox – practically everyone agrees - he may have been the most important post-Bible theologian ever. By the way, Augustine is the patron saint of *both* theologians and beer brewers – I don't know the link but there it is!

Now, sometimes some of you will say to me after a message “I love it when you work history into the sermons.” Well, I am going to really put that to the test this morning. Because I want you to come to understand this theme of idolatry from the master. I think it’s such a vitally important concept – and really everything we’re going to be talking about during the series rests on understanding it. So I’ve been reading a lot from St. Augustine’s “Confessions” – one of the most important books ever written. But Harry Potter it *ain’t*, so we’re going to have to work to hang together a little. But it’s all about *this*.

Now, let me give you some context, St. Augustine had a lot of trouble with two things; food and sex. So at first I said, “Nobody in Austin is going to be able to relate to this.” But I decided to go ahead anyway. So let’s at least *try* to imagine what it might be like to struggle with food and sex. But as he put it, he couldn’t get enough of “beauty” – beautiful bodies, beautiful smells, beautiful tastes, he loved it all.

But Augustine began to realize that because he was so driven by beauty, three things were happening in his life – one, he was always empty and unsatisfied; two, he was constantly doing things he didn’t really want to do but couldn’t seem to stop doing them; and number three his relationships were always breaking up. And so he was trying to figure out what was

wrong with him and he came up with a couple of things. He came up with a theory that all of our problems come from something that he called “disordered loves”.

So, for instance, early in the *Confessions*, he says this, “You say ‘A man has murdered someone – well what was his motive? Either he desired the man’s wife or his property, maybe he was afraid of losing something to this man; or maybe he *had* lost something to him and now he was burning to be revenged...So why does any man commit murder? Every man who commits murder does so because he loves something; because he loves something too much. And that is the motive for his crime.” Isn’t that interesting?

You say, “What?” That’s right, when you see a murder, it’s because somebody loves something too much. He explains it like this, “There’s a splendor in all bodies that are beautiful to the eye. The sense of touch and taste have their own power to please. Worldly honor too has its own glory as does the power to command. The bond of human friendship has a sweetness all its own, binding souls together.”

“But it is in the way we seek these pleasures that sin is committed. Because we have an inordinate preference for these goods of a lower order and neglect the better and the higher good - neglecting you, our Lord God, and your truth and your law.”

“For these inferior values have their delights, but not at all equal to you my God, who has made them all... When, therefore, we inquire why a crime was committed, we do not accept the explanation unless it appears that there was the desire to obtain some of those values which we designate inferior in comparison with the superior and celestial goods.”

Ok, explain. Material things – money, possessions – are not as important as human beings. Right? Human beings are of a *higher order* of good. A tricked out sports car is good, but it’s not as important as a human being. But then, human beings are not as important and valuable and glorious as God. If you put – and this is what modern humanity is doing – if you put money and possessions over relationships, over family, over friendships – over *people* – that’s a disordered love. You’re loving something as if it were first or second when it should only be third. It’s a disordered love.

But he says, if you love human beings – which are second – *as if* they are God. As if their love, their honor, their beauty were the *ultimate* beauty that’s going to satisfy your desire for love and honor and beauty, *that’s* a disordered love. And *all* disordered loves lead to brokenness. And all the problems you have in your life and all the problems we have in the world come from disordered loves. You say, “Well, how can that be?” Here’s why, because disordered love – that means making a good thing into an ultimate thing

– creates three problems in you. Augustine says it starves you, it emotionally enslaves you and it divides you. Let’s look at each of those.

First of all, it starves you. There’s a very famous statement that comes from Augustine’s *Confessions*, here’s the run up to it. He says “What does ambition seek except honor and glory? But only you Lord have an eternal glory that can never be lost. What does the powerful man desire except to be feared? But only you Lord have an eternal power that can never be conquered. What do the lonely and the anguished long for except a love they cannot lose? But who can give a love that does not fade or die but you? What does weariness seek except rest? But what sure rest is there apart from you? Thus the soul commits adultery whenever it turns from you and seeks these things that it cannot find apart from you.” - And here’s the famous bit - **“Oh Lord you made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.”**

Now, here’s what sin is; it’s not sinful to want honor, it’s not sinful to want love, it’s not sinful even to want power and it’s not sinful to want rest. But the sin in our hearts makes us seek a *kind* of honor, a *kind* of love, a *kind* of power and a *kind* of rest in created things – in creatures - rather than in the Creator. In the Father’s *things* rather than in the Father. So we put our *highest* hopes for honor in how we’re doing in our jobs. We put our *highest* hopes for love in a relationship with a human being – spouse, lover, parents, child, whatever – and that will destroy them and destroy you.

Why? Well, first of all they can't give it to you because *they're* empty. That's what the younger brother discovered – all the stuff he was chasing left him starving and empty. **But secondly, the idolatry emotionally enslaves you.** That's what's going on with the elder brother. Because you see, his heart was “I'm going to get it *all* now.” But when it was jeopardized, he gets terribly angry. Why?

Here's why; if you want a good name and somebody ruins your good name, you're mad. “Anthony's a real jerk.” Well, that upsets me. But if you make a good name into the *ultimate* thing that makes you who you are and makes you significant – you're getting your self-image from what people say about you. If you've made that good thing into an ultimate thing, then if somebody ruins your name you go ballistic – you may kill them. See?

To know that suddenly your father is giving away part of your inheritance and you were expecting to have *this* much and now you only have *this* much, that'll make you sad. That'd make me sad. But when that is the ultimate thing in your life – when that is the thing that makes you feel good about yourself; when that is your hope and security for the future – well then when it starts to shrink you go ballistic. You might kill. That's what Augustine means.

And then that brings us to the third thing that disordered love idolatry does to you – so it starves you, it enslaves you – **and third it divides you.** I'll tell you the ultimate reason why idolatry destroys community. Now, a big chunk of Augustine's *Confessions* is dedicated to discussing the Trinity – God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – one God, three persons. And I know that makes our brains hurt to try to think about. The Trinity is the snow cone of theology – brain freeze! But nobody gets at the beauty of the Trinity quite like Augustine. He really set the standard on the doctrine of the Trinity.

So here's what Augustine says; if the world is here by accident – if there is no God – then the meaning of life is basically impersonal. And you're here because of powerful, accidental eruptions and forces – a big bang – it's all about power. And secondly he says, if there is a uni-personal God - no Trinity, just a God with one personality – then that God would not have known love *until* He created a universe filled with angels and human beings. Because you can't have love without an object *to* love.

So a uni-personal God would have had power at first but not love until later. Are you tracking with me? So if there is *no* God, all you've got is power – that's what evolution is based on, the strong over the weak. And if there is a uni-personal God, then power is *still* more important than anything else, because it came first.

But *if* the Christian God is *the* God – if God is “triune”, one God, three persons; Father, Son and Spirit – then that means that before they ever exercised their power to create the world, God was a community in Himself. A community of beings loving and knowing one another and communicating with each other. And that means that community – that loving relationships – are *the ultimate* meaning of life. It’s the ultimate meaning of life – it comes *before* building and performance and power. Do you see how radical this is in a “success” oriented society? Do you see *why* we are supposed to put people over business? It’s *deeply* theological.

And, the infinite happiness of God, works out of this. We know because of what Jesus told us, that the Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father and the Holy Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son and they both glorify the Holy Spirit. What does that mean? Each Divine person serves the others, glorifies the others, adores the others. Does not *take* glory, but *gives* glory. And if we were made in the image of that God, then there are two bottom lines for our existence.

Number one, your life is about community. Your life is about loving relationships. If you come to Austin and do what pretty much everyone does; you put individual achievement, money, status and advancement ahead of community and relationships and serving other people, you are going to dash yourself on the rocks of ultimate reality. You weren’t built for that. There’s going to be brokenness in your life.

But also, if you were created in the image of that God, it’s not just that relationships with others will be important, but you were made to do *with God* what God does within Himself. See, each of the Divine Beings centers on the others – they don’t say “Me, Me, Me Me!” You ever had that nagging thought that “is God selfish to want to be worshipped?” No, because the Father is saying “look at the Son” and the Son is saying “look at the Holy Spirit” and the Holy Spirit is saying “look at the Father”. Do you see the rich beauty of the Trinity? That’ll blow our mind. God’s nature is to give glory and adoration to God.

And if you were made in the *image* of that God...you were meant to put God in the center of your life. To say, “I’m going to serve God, not myself. I’m going to serve His desires, not my own.” And if you do with God what God is doing within Himself, you will know the joy. Because He will fulfill those great deep needs for beauty and for love and for honor and for power and for rest. And then you’ll be able to give them to others.

But if you try to seek those things in other finite human beings – in creatures rather than the Creator – you will be too broken up and angry like the elder brother - too addicted like the younger brother – to care for others.

You have to have your disordered loves healed. So that God is *the* beauty of your life and *the* center of your life. It's not enough just to believe in Him or just obey Him – then you might just be a younger brother or an elder brother. You have to center your life completely on Him until you can say, “I don't really care what You give me, I don't care how many prayers You answer, I love You. I don't just find You useful to get things, I find You beautiful for who You are in Yourself.”

Now, finally, remember this is just the intro, there's a lot we've got to talk about. Somebody asked me, “How are you going to preach for six weeks on just the prodigal son?” Trust me...there's so much we haven't even touched in, but let's look at one more. Remember what the commentators said a Middle Eastern Patriarch would have done when the younger son came and said, “Give me mine.” He should have slapped him and driven him out with verbal and physical blows. And I'll tell you why most of us would do that even if you're not a Middle Eastern Patriarch.

When you've been hurt badly by someone you want to lessen the wound and the best way to lessen the wound is to turn your admiration and your desire for that person into anger and bitterness and sour grapes. You want to start saying “What did I ever see in him?”

Why did I ever see anything in her?” So what you want to do is close your heart – harden your heart. You want to fill it with anger and bitterness because that stops the hurt. Why are so many divorces so nasty? Because they hurt so badly. We'd rather be angry than sad.

But *if* the father had done that when the younger son left, there never could have been reconciliation. The son would have probably never come back, but even if he did the father's heart would never have been open. So what does the father do? One of the things that the commentators always find fascinating about this story is that it says there, after the younger brother asked for his inheritance, it says (v.12) so the father “*divided his property between them*”. But the word “property”, the Greek word there is not the ordinary word for capital or assets or possessions. It's very strange; all the commentators point it out. For some reason, Jesus uses the word *bios* there and that's the word for “life” – biology.

Here's what it's saying; the only way for the father to really give this son a third of the property – they didn't have cash and ATMS, it didn't work like that; they didn't have banks...better for them! – the only way he could have given a third of his estate would have meant he'd have to sell his land. He would have had to sell his ancestral land that he had inherited from his father and probably his father before that.

You know the musical *Oklahoma*? There's a line in it that says, "Oh we know we belong to the land. And the land we belong to is grand." Now listen, it doesn't say the land belonged to them. Did you hear it? It said they belong to the land. Because in ancient times – even in Oklahoma times – a family's land was their identity. That's my ancestral land! And therefore, what the text is telling us is that because of the younger son's sin, the only way his father could keep open the possibility of salvation was for him to tear his life apart. He divided his *bios* – tore his life apart.

You see, the way we would have dealt with it is we would have thrown the pain on the son. We would have beat him and turned our heart away from him. And that would have helped. But not this father, this father suffered for his son's sin. He suffered for the *possibility* of redemption. He bore the agony of his son's sin so that eventually they could be reconciled.

Now, back to Augustine; near the end of the *Confessions* Augustine finally tells us how his soul was healed. There's a place where he says, "You know it's all about beauty. Because if I just sit there and say, 'well, I better love God more and put him ahead of my family or otherwise I'll mess my family up.' Or 'I better like God more than I like making money otherwise it'll make me worry too much or do unethical things to get money.'" And he said you can't just do that with an act of the will. You can't just say, "Well, I'm going to serve God first above everything else." How you going to do that?

But what he does say is it's got to be about beauty, because we're made for beauty. Augustine say, "You know when you see a beautiful body go by, you cannot help but be attracted to that human being and you want to go over and talk to him or her." In other words, when you see beauty, it automatically attracts you and it engages action. And so, the answer to all of our problems - the answer to all of our broken communities and distorted loves – the answer is I've got to see God as beautiful. Not just believe in Him in some general way.

And so finally Augustine gets to the place in the *Confessions* where he says, "How have you loved us, O good Father, who did not spare your only Son, but delivered him up for us. How have you loved us, Lord Jesus who though equal with the Father became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Father, your son became both Victor and Victim for us; Victor because he was the Victim. Father, your son became both Priest and Sacrifice for us; Priest because he was the Sacrifice. Out of slaves, he made us sons, because though he was born a son he became a slave and served you and us instead of himself. Rightly, then, is my hope fixed strongly on him, and this will heal all the diseases of my soul."

There is nothing more beautiful...there is no more beautiful sight...no more beautiful thought...than that an infinitely perfect and happy being would descend into this world and sacrifice everything for ungrateful, undeserving human beings like us. That a perfect being, who doesn't have to do it, would chose to tear his life apart...for us.

If you even get a glimpse of the beauty of that, it'll heal the disease of your soul. You'll *have* to go after it. You'll *have* to engage Him. It will center you on Him so that you are finally free to love everyone around you.

Let's pray...