

“He Came to His Senses”

The Prodigal God, Pt. 2

We’re looking at Jesus’ longest and most famous parable, the story that has come to be called “The Prodigal Son” – although as I’ve said, I don’t really like that title and I’ll tell you why in coming weeks. But first thing, did you do your homework? If you tuned in last week, I asked everyone to read the story for themselves - it’s a classic. But, if you didn’t, relax – it’s like the end of this last school year, no one is really grading homework during CORONA time. But I will go ahead and read the story for you this week...but only the first half, so maybe you can finish some of the homework on your own.

Luke 15:11–24, *“Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*

14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’

20 So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Famous story, but as we said last week, as famous as it is, it’s often not understood to be what it really is and that’s the story of a meltdown of community and the restoration of it. So for example, the family – which is the basic unit of community – has unraveled in this story. The younger son has asked for his inheritance early – *before* the father dies, which we saw last week that in that culture meant he was saying to his dad, “I wish you were dead”. His heart was set on the father’s things, not on the father.

So he takes the money and runs and leaves his father and his family in the rear-view mirror – he’s rejected his family. And not just his family. Because we see that when he gets desperate towards the end he actually finds a job feeding pigs – now I don’t know what you know about Jews and pigs, but...not so much. So this means he’s not only rejected his family, but he’s rejected his faith community as well. But the rest of the story, after the first couple of verses is about how the community finally starts to be restored. And the key theme we’re going to look at this morning that is crucial for restoration to take place is the theme of repentance.

Even though the word itself is not found in this text, repentance is absolutely key to the story. We’re told in another parable that Jesus shares just before this one – the parable of the lost sheep – that God loves repentance. He says in **Luke 15:7**, “*I tell you that in the same way there will be **more rejoicing** in heaven over one sinner who **repents** than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*” So God loves repentance – celebrates whenever it happens.

So what we have in this story when the son decides to go back to his father is a powerful example of repentance, so that’s what we’re going to spend our time on this morning. So I want to show you the **importance** of repentance, what true repentance **looks like**, and finally I want us to see the **key** to repentance. So let me start by showing you how important repentance is.

So **first** and more briefly, **the importance of repentance**. Let’s think about this, what is *the* key factor that begins to heal the younger son’s lostness, what is *the* key factor that begins to restore the family? The father all along has been loving his son, right? But what is the *fuse* that detonates the father’s love into radical action in the son’s life? It’s repentance! The term in **v.17**, “*When he came to his senses...*” that’s a Hebrew idiom for repentance. And even though the father loved the son already – never stopped loving him - what triggers his love into radical action is the repentance of the son.

And if the father in the story represents God – which he does – then we’re being told no less than this, “If you want the **love** of God and the **power** of God to **explode** in your life, the **fuse** is repentance.” God loves everybody, but what turns His love into amazing action is repentance. Jesus was always saying in his preaching “Repent and believe the gospel”, “repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Do you know what he was saying? He’s saying, “If you don’t repent, I have nothing to give you, nothing to do for you. You can’t even begin to enter into my realm.” Repentance is the key to everything.

When Martin Luther set the Protestant Reformation in motion in 1517, he did so by nailing a list of his beliefs – *the 95 theses* – to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral to get the Church’s attention. Now, our church has glass doors, so just send me an email, ok? But this is one of the most important documents in church history. And the very first of the 95 theses – number one – was “All of life is repentance.” The very first of Martin Luther’s theses in which he was laying out his understanding of Biblical Christianity was “*all of life is repentance*”.

Now, that’s completely different than what the world thinks. A couple of hundred years later, the famous poet Lord Byron wrote “the weak alone repent.” So here’s Luther saying, “All of life ought to be repentance” and in the other corner you’ve got Lord Byron saying “the weak alone repent.”

And when it comes to our modern world, who won? What most people today think is that repentance is for the weak, it’s disempowering and it’s something you hope never happens – something you hope never to have to do. We have a saying that we use in all sorts of contexts; “fill in the blank means never having to say you’re sorry.”

A prominent American politician who confesses to be a Christian was asked if he’d ever asked God for forgiveness. His response was, “I am not sure I have, I just go on and try to do a better job from there. I don’t think so, I think if I do something wrong, I think, I just try and make it right. I don’t bring God into that picture. I don’t.” Just some prominent American politician...

But Martin Luther says that as he reads the Bible, he sees repentance as being the very opposite. First of all, Luther teaches that repentance is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. Do you realize how secure you have to feel – how *strong* spiritually and emotionally you need to be – in order to repent at the drop of a hat? You do something wrong, you humble yourself and admit it. That’s so rare – why? - because everyone is so strong? No, because we’re too *weak* to do it. The inability to repent is a sign of *weakness*, not strength.

So the world says “weakness” and Luther says “strength.” Secondly, the world says it’s an experience of disempowerment. No, says Luther, repentance is an experience of liberation. A person who is constantly repentant is a person who is finally free. Free from the need to win every argument, free from the need to always defend yourself, free from the need to expose other people to show they’re not so great. See?

A repentant person is someone who is vulnerable and happy to do it. You can't hold anything over my head, because I've left nothing hidden. "You're right, I shouldn't have done that, let's make it right." That's liberation! I don't have to spin everything and control what they think about me.

And therefore, since it's not a sign of weakness but strength, since it's not an experience of disempowerment but of liberation, therefore, Luther says it should happen all the time. All of your life should be repentance if you understand gospel Christianity. Ok, so who's right? Luther or Lord Byron? Who's right? The Bible or the world? Now, you're in church, so you probably could answer without even thinking.

But actually, the answer might surprise you. Because I think that in a way they're *both* right. You know why? Because there really are two kinds of repentance. Paul talks about it in **2 Corinthians 7:10** where he says, "**Godly sorrow** brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but **worldly sorrow** brings death."

Isn't that interesting? There's a kind of repentance – a kind of admission of wrong-doing, a confession of guilt – that leads to salvation and life and *no regret*. No beating yourself up for years, see. And then there's a kind of repentance which leads to devastation and self-doubt and loss of power and *death*. Well, we better get it right then! So let's move to part **two**: let's talk about **what true repentance looks like**.

What is this "godly sorrow" that God is so excited about according to Paul and our parable. What is this repentance that Luther was talking about that, if you understand it, should be a constant part of your life? Well, we can learn a couple of things about the nature of true repentance by seeing in this parable what the younger son does *right* – two things.

The first thing he does we've already referred to, in **v.17** he "**came to his senses**". Isn't that an interesting phrase? Now, we live in a culture of self-determination – the "self-made man" or woman – pull myself up by my own bootstraps. But think about this – if the thing that really deeply changes your life and brings you to freedom and power and joy is "coming to your senses" - can you wake yourself up from a trance? No. Do you *decide* to wake up from a nightmare? Not really.

Let me put it this way, the sins in your life, the flaws in your life, the character short-comings in your life that are creating the most problems for you right now and causing the most problems for the ones around you, by definition are the ones you *can't* see. See, that's what makes them the worst ones. The most harmful flaws, by definition, are the ones you can't see; you're in **denial** about. The human heart runs on denial the way my car runs on gas. You know that.

Well, then repentance is a moment in which you come to your senses, but how does that happen? It happens *to* you. Your wrong-doing sets up strains in the fabric of reality. God set things up to run one way – for people to forgive and put others first and love unselfishly – and when we are unforgiving and proud and selfish, it goes against the way the universe was designed and it eventually breaks down. And when it breaks down there is pain. Think about your body, pain is a sign that something isn't working right – there's a strain in the fabric of your physical system. Somebody has a heart attack and we call it a “wake up call.”

Repentance starts with coming to your senses and that's not something you can do in yourself. It's something that comes *to* you and then you respond to it. But you can miss it. See, anybody that sees their heart clearly knows that the seasons in which you see

yourself clearly are not seasons that come at your command. They *come*...and then you have to respond. So the first thing is that true repentance – life changing repentance - **always happens in response** to you coming to your senses which involves a **revelation** that comes to you – through circumstances or other people.

Number two, when this younger son actually responds, he does it right, because he says in **v. 18** “*I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.*” There it is: **vertical and horizontal** – I've sinned against heaven and I've sinned against you – and that's the right order. Let's look at this.

First of all he says, “*I've sinned against heaven.*” Now wait a minute, he hurt the father, he hurt the elder brother, he hurt the family, he hurt the village – but primarily he says “I've hurt God.” What? Well, if you go back to the Old Testament - to Psalm 51, the greatest and most famous confession of sin in the Bible - King David is confessing his sin for having an affair with a man's wife, getting her pregnant, and then using his power as king to arrange to have that man killed in battle. And in **Psalm 51:4** he begins his confession with, talking to God, “*Against you, you only, have I sinned...*” Well, hold on now, what about the guy who's dead? He might take issue with that.

Why would David say, “God first?” But that’s right, because biblical, life-changing repentance – *liberating* repentance – starts by understanding that whatever sin you’ve done, primarily, first of all, you have sinned against the goodness of God. Why is that important? Here’s why; what is it that wakes you up to what’s wrong with you? Pain, we said.

And what’s wrong with you – at the core - is a form of self-centeredness. But when the pain wakes you up that you’ve been bad, the great danger at that moment is that you want to do *anything* at all to get rid of the pain. And it’s very possible for your form of “repentance” to be not a change *from* self-centeredness, but to be actually a greater, deeper, experience *of* self-centeredness.

Think about the example of the couple that comes in for marriage counseling. He’s been a very arrogant, manipulative, selfish man and his wife finally said to him, “I’m leaving you.” She packed her bags. And he said, “If I go to counseling with you, would it help?” And so she agrees and they sit in the counselor’s office and she’s goes down a list of all the things she wants him to change. And he’s so scared and so upset that he agrees to it all.

So she says, “Stop doing this.” And so, that week he did. And then the next week she says, “Start doing this” and that week he did. And then the next week and the next and things started going along better and she sees hope and decides not to leave. But after a few months – once he was sure she wasn’t going to leave him – he went right back to the way he was before. Now, was he sitting there in the room the first couple of times thinking, “I’ll just *act* like I’m going to change, but I won’t, I’ll just fool her and then she won’t leave me.” Was that what he was thinking?

No. He was *really* sad. He was really in pain. He was really upset...for *himself*. You see to really be upset about the *consequences* of your sin; to really be upset because of the *pain* your sin is bringing you is not the same thing as being upset about the *sin*. It’s saying “I’ll do anything it takes.” But you actually aren’t changing, see? You’re actually becoming *more* self-centered and more manipulative.

And so even though the guy was very upset, he was upset *for himself*. He wasn’t upset for what he’d done to her and he certainly wasn’t upset about how he’d disobeyed God. And as a result, he never changed – and in time he actually got worse.

So, “why bring God into it?” Here’s why; one great puritan writer explained the big difference between a selfish kind of repentance and true repentances. He says, “A legalistic conviction of sin arises from a consideration of God’s justice chiefly. But a gospel conviction of sin arises from a sense of God’s goodness.” (Stephen Charnock) Did you catch that?

He says, “A legalistic convicted person cries out, ‘I have exasperated a power that is as the roaring of a lion! I have provoked one who is the sovereign lord of heaven and of earth who’s word can tear up the foundation of the world.’ But a gospel convicted person says, ‘I have incensed a goodness like the dropping of the dew, I have offended a God that has the deportment of a friend.’” All the difference in the world.

You see, when you say, “I have sinned against one who can destroy the foundation of the earth!” What are you upset about? “I’m going to get it!” He’s upset about himself. “I’m going to suffer, oh no.” But see, there’s another approach that says, “Look at this good and loving God. Look at all the things He’s done for me, all the things He wants for me. How could I *treat* Him like this? How could I break His heart?”

When you repent, not just about the fact that you broke the rules and it’s messing up your life, but when you repent because you realize that you have broken His heart. It helps you to hate the *sin*. It helps you to hate the *thing* you did, not just the consequence of the sin and you begin to stop doing it. You actually begin to change. You don’t become *more* self-centered you become *less* self-centered.

There’s a kind of repentance that focuses entirely on what’s wrong with you, which just pushes you *deeper* into self-centeredness. But there’s a kind of repentance that’s focused on the goodness of God – and how you’ve broken His heart – you look there first. And *that* changes the self-centeredness that is ruining your life.

But let’s go on, because he doesn’t stop with “I’ve sinned against God” he also says he’s sinned against his earthly father; there’s the horizontal piece. And it’s just right. No blame shifting. No excuses. You see that? He doesn’t come back and say, “My father I have sinned against you, but if you had my elder brother...and you had to share a bunk-bed year after year after year with this self-righteous Pharisee...you have no idea.” No, he doesn’t say that.

Nor does he say, “Father I have sinned against you...but I’m a young man and I had to sow my wild oats and ‘boys will be boys.’” No. No excuses; no blame shifting. And what you have here is true repentance. Repentance is a response to an awakening – coming to your senses – that focuses on God and gets away from self-pity; it takes *complete* and absolute moral responsibility without blame shifting or excuse making at all.

And now we’re pretty close to understanding what kind of repentance we’re supposed to have if we really want it to be a life changing, liberating, empowering thing...but we’re not quite done. I need to show you, part **three, the key to true repentance**. Because the key to it all is seen not so much in what the younger son *did* do right, but in what he didn’t. Because the last thing we see here is his little speech that he comes up with.

His plan is pretty simple, he’s going to say, (v.18-19) “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; **make me like one of your hired servants.***” Ah...what’s that about? Make me like one of you “hired” men. Back then, a domestic servant was someone who actually lived on the estate, but a “hired man” was someone who lived in town – in the village – he was a contract worker who was paid a wage. So do you see what he’s doing?

He’s saying, “Father I know I’ve sinned, I’ve wronged you, but I don’t want your mercy...I don’t want your grace...I don’t want to just come back into the family, I want to pay back absolutely every single cent I took from you. And when I pay it all back, maybe *then* I can be back in the family. I don’t want grace, I want to *earn* my way back.”

Now, it’s very important to remember that because this is a parable – it’s an illustration of a principle, it’s not something that ever really happened, but a story Jesus made up – we have to be careful to really read this on two levels. Because at one level, if you as a human being are going to another human being to try to make things right because you have wronged them, then this is perfectly fine. In other words, if you’ve stolen something, you ought to give it back. If you’ve cheated somebody, you ought to do everything you can to pay them back; make it right. That’s fine.

But if the father in this story is *God*, then the younger son’s approach to repentance towards God is the biggest mistake you can make. Here’s why; just for a minute, keep in mind something that we often talk about here...religion vs. gospel. Somebody in the church told me a while back that she’s really enjoying coming to SWFF but that her husband doesn’t come because he isn’t a big fan of organized religion. And I said, “Well, tell him I’m not either.”

Religion is an approach to God that says if I have a good record and if I do everything right, *then* God will bless me. “If I really live the kind of life I should and I serve people and I’m really moral and I’m a good husband or wife or mother or father or son or daughter; if I’ve been a good boy, God will bless me.” Ok? And in that framework, what is the source of your confidence, and your power and your hope? That good record! When I feel like I have a strong record, then I feel good about myself. And this is why in a religious understanding of things, repentance is a *disaster*.

Because first of all, repentance is an experience of weakness because it separates you from your source of power – which is that I have a good name and I have a good record. Repentance is admitting that you *don’t* have. And so as soon as you start to repent, you’re just devastated. It separates you from your hope, from your power and from your confidence. And then secondly, in a religious framework – it’s not just a sign of weakness, but - repentance is a way of atoning for your own sin. Always. Why?

Because if your hope is this great moral record, then do you know what you’re trying to do when you repent? You try to beat yourself up and talk about how awful you are – to yourself and to others – and it’s all an attempt to get that good record back. What you’re actually trying to say is, “Ok, I thought I was a good person, but I’m realizing that maybe I’m not so good.

But if I talk about how bad I am, then surely, only a good person would think they’re so bad, right? Surly, God and other people will come to believe how good I am because the way I’m beating myself up so much.” Scourge, anyone? Just whip yourself back into the Father’s good graces.

So in a religious context, repentance is a disaster because it *separates* you from your source of power. It’s a way of doing what the younger son says, “I’m going to earn my way back, pay it all back.” And as a result, in a religious context, repentance just goes on and on and on because how do you know if you’ve beaten yourself up *enough* to really earn your way back? And you gnaw at yourself for the rest of your life and you never *do* get your confidence back and you never get your joy back. It’s a disaster.

But absolutely everything in this parable argues *against* that approach to repentance. Look, when the younger son approaches his home, where is the father? It’s pretty interesting. Here’s what he’s *not* doing; we don’t have a father who’s sitting inside his house, occasionally glancing out the window until suddenly he happens to see the son. And he says, “Well, what have we here? There’s that artist formerly known as my younger son. This better be good! After what he’s done to me; let him crawl. Let him grovel. And if he grovels enough, *maybe* it’ll reach my heart, but this better be good.” That’s not what we have. Not at all.

(v.20) “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*”

You’ve got a Middle Eastern patriarch who’s obviously on the lookout because when he’s still far off he sees him. And he *runs* – we’ll get to this actually next week – Middle Eastern patriarchs didn’t run. You had to pull up your skirts to run – so if you were a boy you ran, if you were a woman you ran – but Middle Eastern patriarchs did not run. But *he* runs. And he embraces – literally it says he “falls on his neck” – and kisses him.

But that’s not all, a few verses later we see he puts a robe on him and covers his nakedness – his embarrassment and shame. And he puts a signet ring on his finger – which means he’s back in the family; he can do contracts. He brings him shoes – that’s about rank; slaves went barefoot, sons wore shoes. And he throws a party feast and he *refuses* to let the son earn his way back in. By sheer grace he allows it. So the whole idea of repentance earning your way back is totally rejected.

And, look closely, the whole religious idea of repentance is “if I really feel sorry enough, maybe I’ll resurrect God’s love.” But in this case it’s the father’s love that actually enables the repentance. Don’t you think this nervous, sad-sack guy, he’s walking back memorizing his speech and all of the sudden, his father *runs*...pounces on him with love and

laughter...don’t you think that might have made the speech a little easier? Of course. Absolutely.

It’s not like our repentance gets God’s love, God’s love *enables* the repentance – His gracious, amazing love. Paul says, (**Romans 5:8**) “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” So here it is, in the religious approach, repentance *separates* you from the source of your power and your confidence and your joy – because that’s your good record. But in the gospel approach, repentance *reconnects* you – or connects you more deeply – to the source of your power and your confidence and your joy. Why? Because if you’re a Christian and you understand the gospel, the source of your self-image is not *your* record but *His* record! Not what *you* have done but what *He* has done! He, Jesus. Well, what did he do?

I think it’s pretty astounding that Jesus told this story. What was he thinking when he tells the story of a son who’s in agony, he’s in rags, he’s crying out and the father *opens* the door and receives him and robes him and feasts him. And yet at the end of Jesus’ life, *he* cries out to his Father, he’s in rags as it were on the cross, and he cries out “My God, My God!” and what happens? The door is *shut*! His nakedness and shame is *not* covered. He gets no feast, he gets vinegar to drink. Why?

Some people use repentance as a way of making themselves miserable to atone for their sins. But Christians know that Jesus Christ on the cross was miserable *for* us. He was stripped naked so that we could be clothed in God's love. He got the rejection we deserved so that we could get the welcome of God. So that even before we repent – while we are still a long way off – God's on us; clothing us, kissing us, feasting us.

See, when you repent you *remember* you're a sinner saved by grace. When you repent you remember that the whole reason that Jesus came was to do this for me. When I repent I get back in touch with who I am; back in touch with my source. That's why gospel Christianity says "all of life is repentance." You want to do it all the time.

When I think about the things that I do wrong, they usually come from pride and self-centeredness. But the gospel says, "You were so lost, that Jesus had to come and die for you." That humbles me to the ground. But other things I do wrong come from fear and anxiety and feeling like I'm not valuable but the gospel says, "Jesus was glad to die for you." And that affirms me to the sky. You mean more to Jesus than the stars in the heavens and all the treasures of the earth.

And the more I get in touch with the knowledge that I'm a sinner saved by grace - the more I'm humbled *and* the more I'm lifted up by his love - the less I need to do the self-centered things that screw up my life and everybody's around me. Repentance is getting back in touch. And to the degree that I get back in touch with the wonder of what he did – how he was willing to come and be stripped and have the door of the universe slammed in his face and have the God of the Universe ignore him when he called – so that when I call, the Father always answers. So that when you call, the Father answers when you come through Jesus Christ.

Don't you see the liberation of being repentant? A repentant person is someone who is free from having to defend himself all the time. Free from worrying what others think. Free from arguing all the time. Free from having to win an argument ever again. And the irony is that a repentant Christian – because it humbles you, the more you repent, the better you get. The less you do those self-centered things and the self-centered things you do get smaller and smaller.

Now, you don't *feel* like you're getting any better because you're humble and you don't see it, but everybody around you can see it. See, it makes you the exact opposite of everybody else in the world. Everybody else in the world is saying "I'm pretty good" but everyone around you can see that you're not. Which person do you want to be?

Hey, one last thing I want to close with. There's an interesting thing that happens when you write this story out in Arabic. I mentioned last week that I am indebted in this series to the writing of Kenneth Bailey who has studied and taught the New Testament throughout the Middle East for decades. He points this out in his book, *The Cross and the Prodigal*.

It's just a beautiful picture of repentance – kind of one of those amazing things. This is what it looks like when you write the phrase “Oh my father I have sinned and I am unworthy” in Arabic. Can you see what that looks like right there in the middle? Whenever “Oh my father” is brought together with “I have sinned”, there is a cross. Right there in the middle, there is a cross.

And the cross is the symbol of God's suffering and His humiliation. But ultimately it is a symbol of grace for you and me. It is a sign of the Father's grace; the Heavenly Father who will run to embrace any of us who will just fall to our knees – throw away our plans to fix everything – and just cling to His grace and His mercy.

I have good news for you. You can go into the party. God has a seat at the table waiting for you. And the placard reads “son” – it reads “daughter”. Not servant, not slave, not hired man – no, you come to the party as family.

Your Father has come out to you. And all you have to do is come home. If there's something stirring in you this morning, something that has awakened, that's the Holy Spirit and he is calling you to come home in repentance. Forget your plans. Forget, “I'll come home when I make this right.” Forget, “I'll come home when I break this addiction.” Forget, “I'll come home when they apologize to me.” Forget all of that nonsense. Just come home.

Just remember that whenever “Oh my father” is brought together with “I have sinned”, there is a cross. Right there in the middle, there is a cross. And at the cross is freedom and hope and joy and peace. At the cross is a party that will never, never end.

Let's pray...