

“To Be Called Your Son”

The Prodigal God, Pt. 3

We’re looking for a number of weeks at this great parable that has come to be known as “The Prodigal Son”. And you may know the story, it may be new to you – you may have heard it a thousand times or you might have just heard *about* it – but I want to read it to you – or at least a portion of it – each week because I think there’s a great power in hearing the Bible read out loud. And so I’m going to read it again and so try not to tune out, but let it really sink in. Ask God to show you something new in it this morning. **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.”

This morning we’re looking at a very important theme in the text. For example, we read at one point in the story that the father says, “my son was *dead*” – now, did he think he was physically dead? No, of course not; so what does that mean? “My son was dead but he’s alive again”. And when the younger brother comes back to repent, you notice the main thing he’s talking about is “I’m not worthy to be called your son” – twice he says that. What did sonship mean then? Because they are talking about it in a way that we don’t completely understand or relate to.

So what did sonship mean in ancient cultures? What did sonship mean in the Bible? We have to understand that – not only if we’re going to understand this story – but some of the greatest information we can get about what God has given to *us* through Jesus. So let’s take a look at this subject of sonship.

Sonship was a status in a way that it isn’t now. And this young man had lost it; he’s right when he says “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Why? Because in ancient culture sonship was something that was much more important than it is in our culture - for a couple of reasons. First of all, the son was the person whose job it was to carry on the family name. The name meant everything.

See, for you and me, the name is the name, you know. It’s just what’s on my driver’s license to distinguish me from other people. But the family name in those days was what the family stood for; the values, the beliefs, the culture and the reputation. And the son was someone who knew it was his job to carry on the family name; represent the family to the community and the world.

But not only that, secondly, it was the son’s job to carry on the family business. Now, this is the place where when we read in the Bible about how sonship worked, we think “How unfair, how old fashioned?” Because in those days, the oldest son got almost *all* of the estate. It’s called the “law of primogenitor.” The oldest son got almost all of the inheritance; the other sons got a little...and the daughters got none. And we see that and say, “this isn’t fair.”

And yeah, it *was* unfair – I’ll grant you that – and *yet*, I think we have to understand the context. Let’s walk a mile in their shoes – at least a block or two – before we judge them too harshly. In those days – and *today* some places in the world – you didn’t survive unless you had a strong, intact family. Wolf pack! In those days, the family was the basic unit of government. So politically you didn’t survive, socially, *physically* unless you had a stable family with means.

And see today, what you and I would do; if you had three children – whether sons or daughters - you would divide your estate between the three of them and they will subsequently divide their estates between their two or three kids, and within a couple of generations, all the wealth is gone. And that doesn’t bother us because our wealth is pretty liquid; future generations can just get more. We have things like cash and stocks and mutual funds.

But in those days it wasn't that way. First of all, you couldn't just go out and accumulate wealth. Wealth had to do with land and animals – means of production. And it was so crucial that the family fortune stay intact, that that's the reason why the oldest son was really an office or a position. It was his job to keep the family fortune all together. Because the economic security of the family was completely dependent on accumulating land and livestock and keeping it together.

And so that was the job of the oldest son - the "law of primogenitor." So the inheritance split seems unfair to us, but let's face facts, we're not in survival mode. Even if you are unemployed and broke, you're not worried that you might not *live* through the winter. They were working without a safety net. And so it might seem unfair to us, but looking back it was really the only way they could survive. And so you begin to realize that to be a son in those days was an office almost. It was a status – extremely important – it was a big deal.

And now you know how incredibly shocking it must have been when the Apostle Paul wrote these words to the early church in **Galatians 3:26, 28 (ESV)** "*for in Christ Jesus you are **all** sons of God, through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither*

*slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are **all** one in Christ Jesus.*"

And in **Galatians 4:4-7 (ESV)** "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive **adoption as sons**. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*"

See, in all the other ancient religions, the gods were kings and everybody was a subject. But here we have a God who says "I'm not just a king and you're my subjects, but I am your *Father* and through Jesus Christ you can be My *sons* – My heirs." This was offering a kind of intimacy with God and an honor in the presence of God that *no* other religion ever offered anyone. It was unique and it blew people away. And we'll get to that in a minute.

But first, I have to say one thing about this; because of our modern insistence on gender neutral language, we've lost something in this. In fact, I couldn't use the translation of the Bible I normally do – the NIV – on those Galatians passages because in an attempt to be inclusive it substitutes "children" when the Greek clearly reads "sons".

Now, I'm not knocking being inclusive in most cases – I do this same kind of thing myself - but here I think we lose something very important. Translating scripture across cultural barriers is nuanced. Sometimes Bible vocabulary gets out of date and we need to find modern words to express Biblical truths. But sometimes, the outdated word is *so* important we need to educate and explain what it's all about.

This is one of those times. Sometimes women today read where the Bible says “You're all sons of God” and they say, “Well, that's pretty insensitive. Why should we go back to a time when sons had all the power and daughters had none?” Well, I'll tell you why we should – I'll tell you why I *am* – because it's *subversive*. Do you know why? When Paul says to a group of Christians – men *and* women – “In God's family, *everyone* is a son”, you could have just blown that original audience over. That was *radical* stuff.

In God's family you are *all* heirs, you're *all* sons. This is God's way of looking at women and saying “I love you just as much, I honor you just as much; if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have just as much a place in the future New Heaven and New Earth as the men do, you are heirs.” So you see ladies, you shouldn't get upset when the Bible calls you “sons of God” anymore than the men ought to squirm when they're called “brides of Christ.” Or in the way that none of us should be insulted when the

Bible says we're all stupid sheep. Because every Biblical metaphor tells us something about God's grace to us that no other metaphor does and therefore we've got to hold on to *all* of them. Including “sons”.

Ok, well how do we apply this? What does this mean in your life if you really grasp it – the idea that in Christ Jesus we are all “sons of God?” Practically? It means three things. **First of all, deep security.** Because adoption – the conferral of sonship status on somebody – is not a gradual change in nature, it's a sudden change in legal status. Right? To be adopted means that you were legally outside the family – you had no claims to the inheritance – but now suddenly you're in. Just like that!

Now, that's not how we see it. In fact, I would go so far as to say that every one of us – including me – doesn't really grasp the security of that. We're like the younger brother. Because when the younger brother came back he said “I'm not worthy to be called your son” – which is true – “make me like one of your hired men.” We looked at this in depth last week, but in other words he's saying “I don't want the status of sonship, I don't deserve *that*, you can't reinstate me into the family, I understand that, but all I want is to be able to pay you back bit by bit –make me like one of your hired men.” But the father will have none of that.

The father said bring a robe, bring a ring. That's a signet ring probably, and that was how you did business back then. You didn't sign your name on a contract, you put the family seal on it. In other words the son is saying "I want to earn my way back." And the father says, "No, you're a son!" Just like *that*.

Well, we're all like that younger son. When we first come to God we *all* say "I'm not worthy" and that's true. "But I'm going to try to *earn* it and I'm going to try to live a good life and go to church and read my Bible and pull it all together and maybe someday at the end God will take me to Heaven." But your Heavenly Father will have none of that. When you believe in Jesus Christ you get *full* rights as sons. And that is an absolutely secure position.

A hired man is like an employee – some of you have firsthand experience of how secure *that* is. If you're an employee and you fail somehow or even just if the company is struggling, you're fired. There's no security in being an employee. But if you're a child and you let down your parents, and you fail, what happens? The parents get more intently interested in you than before. That's how it's always worked in *my* family. The best way to get more of your father's love and attention than you've ever had before is to screw up.

Why? It's *totally* different than being a hired man; it's a status, it's a standing, it's secure. That's why the great 19th century preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, has a pastoral question that he would always ask people. He pastored Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years and he had a diagnostic question he would ask people.

He'd say, "Let me ask you, right now, are you a Christian? Are you a child of God?" And if the person said, as they often did, "Well, I'm *trying*." He knew, here was a person who didn't understand what it meant to be a Christian at all. Here's a person who wants to be a hired man or a hired woman, but doesn't understand the deep security of having sonship conferred on you. So that's the first benefit of sonship – deep security.

Secondly, when we get hold of our sonship, we realize we have an **intimate access**. A theologian named Sinclair Ferguson wrote a great book on this called "*Children of the Living God*". And he tells the story of a missionary who adopted a poor young orphan girl, and even though she knew she was legally in the family, she was still very standoffish and formal. And one day, he was at his desk and she came up to him with her shoe in hand and said, "Daddy, I need a new shoe lace." And he melted. Because she was finally treating him as a father.

And do you know what that means? A child has access that no one else does. Look, if *you* go to Washington DC and want to see the White House, call your congressman and they can maybe get you a ticket to the tour and you still won't get to see the Oval Office. But if your name happens to be Baron Trump, you don't have to call your congressman to see the Oval Office. You have an access that nobody else has. Kids have that.

Even my wife, if she's not sick, and at 3 am she wakes me up and says, "I need a cup of water." I would say, "Get it yourself!" This is my spouse. But when my kids were little, if one of them came paddling up in the middle of the night and said "Daddy, I'm thirsty." I get out of bed. Why? It's your child. Nobody else can get through like that. That's access. They come to you for shoelaces.

So first of all you've got the deep security, second you have intimate access and then **thirdly**, when you grasp the true nature of sonship, you have a **future hope**. What does it mean when Paul says that you are "heirs"? It means that in the new heavens and new earth that God is developing, we are going to rule together with Him. Remember how we said that in old times, it was expected that the sons would take over the family business?

Do you know what that means for us? God is in the business of perfecting this world. Getting rid of every flaw until someday it's a glorious world with no suffering and no stain, nothing. And God is saying, "That's your inheritance."

You know, we're living in a scary economic time. Very frightening. Nobody's sure about the future of the markets and financial institutions. Wouldn't it be nice to know that not too far in the future – no matter what happens to you right now; no matter what mistakes you make – but that not too far in the future there's an *enormous* inheritance of wealth coming to you. Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't that make everything look different? You'd get up in the morning, "Woops, stock market's down a thousand points, oh well." Because you've got an inheritance coming.

But it's *true*! Do you not realize that? Listen again to Paul's words, this time in **Romans 8:16-18**, "*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that **we are God's children**. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*"

You know if you and I adopt a child, we can give them our name, our philosophy, our values, but we can't inject our DNA into them, but God *can*. Because He puts His Holy Spirit in us. And we're told that on the last day of human history, God's DNA as it were – the Holy Spirit – is going to transform us; make us fully ourselves. The entire family resemblance of God our Father – all of His love, all of His goodness, all of His greatness – will finally be 110% realized in your life and you will *explode* into your new self.

And we're told that the whole heaven and earth will explode into its true self and we will rule and reign over it all with Christ at our side. And Paul says, "That's coming!" So when I'm in the middle of my suffering, I think about my inheritance. I think about what's coming my way until I can handle anything now.

Now, if you're a person who grasps your sonship so that you have that deep security, that intimate access and that incredible confidence about life in the future – and I'm a person who has grasped my sonship – if all of us start to get this, what kind of community would that make us? Well, when the Bible talks about the kind of community we should be since we all have one Father and we're all through Christ made children of God and we have this status as sons – whenever the Bible describes that kind of community it uses the term "brotherly love".

In Greek it's *phileo*, but unfortunately, in English, "brotherly love" sounds kind of hippy-dippy-do-da. Sounds kind of vague and wishy washy. I don't know how to explain it well, but the ancient pagans knew what it meant. If we are brothers and sisters – the person sitting in the chair next to you is your brother or sister in Christ – that has *radical* implications because we are not just members of the same religious organization. No, brothers and sisters are totally different.

Lucian of Samosata was a 2nd Century pagan critic of the church – didn't like the church. He makes this comment about the early Christians, "Their founder, Jesus Christ, persuaded them that they should be like brothers to one another and therefore they despise their own privacy and view all of their possessions as common property." See, he knew, if these people are just members of the same organization, well fine, but if they're brothers and sisters, do you realize how *radical* that is? It means they have claims on one another. They can get up in one another's business.

See, the pagans knew that to say that Christian community was marked by *phileo* – "brotherly love" – was the most radical thing you could possibly say. Do we? Do we realize that? I don't think so. Look, here's some implications of that; first of all brothers and sisters means unconditional commitment. Do you know what that means? You didn't choose your siblings did you? I know some of you are saying, "I sure didn't!" You don't choose your siblings, you're born into it.

Because you have the same parents, you have these siblings. So it's not a consumer choice. In fact many times they are people that you'd *never* choose as your friends. Never! But there's a bond, right? A bond by having the same parents. Of sharing the same *ordeal* of being raised by the same parents. There's a bond there even those these are people very different from you.

Look, you can choose your own church – you come to Austin and you choose a church; plenty to choose from. But *inside* the church, you must not choose your brothers and sisters. You must not avoid the people you don't like. They're your brothers and sisters. You can't network in a church – this is not just a religious organization.

There are people here who you would *never* choose as friends – just like your blood siblings - but they are your brothers and sisters. And they have things to say to you and things to do in your life that no one else can. “Birds of a feather flock together” is not the rule inside the church. Don't just hang around people that are like you and you like and you feel can help your career. You don't do that here. Unconditional commitment; you can choose your church but you can't choose your sibling's *within* the church.

But there's another thing; what got Lucian of Samosata so upset? If we're brothers and sisters, that means we have a **claim** on one another's **resources**. That's certainly the way it is within the family, you know that. Inside a family, when someone has a financial problem, the other members feel an obligation to try and help, that you otherwise wouldn't...because you're family.

Justin Martyr, one of the early church fathers wrote “We used to value getting wealth and possessions above all things, but now we bring what we have to a common fund and we share with everyone in need. We used to hate and destroy one another of different races, but now since the coming of Jesus Christ we live in harmony with others of differing races and pray for our enemies.” Do people look in on the church today and say that about us? If not it means we're more of a religious organization than a family of brothers and sisters.

See if you go to a club or a class or an organization of some kind, you only have one point of contact. You come together in the class because you all want to study a subject and get a degree. You come together in a company because you all want to produce a product or a service and make money. You come together in the bird-watchers club because you all want to watch birds.

But if at the bird-watchers club, one of your fellow ornithologists – look it up – says to you “Why are you dating *him*?” You’ll say, “Let’s get back to bird watching, please. I’ve come here as a bird-watcher and that’s what we’re here to do and it’s none of your business who I date.” That’s outside the scope of the club.

But in a family, it’s not just one point of contact. In a family, you play together, you eat together, you study together, you walk together, you talk together. And it’s the people you do life with that actually shape you. And your problems and my problems have come largely from the social environments that we have come from. And so if you want to change, just taking a class is not enough. Just coming and listening to good sermons is not enough. You’re only going to change if you re-loved by a new family. And here it is. Do you understand why we call this church Southwest *Family* Fellowship? It’s not about, do you have kids?...it’s about are *you* one? It’s not a club, it’s a family.

At one level you could say that you shouldn’t just come to the big services, but you need to be in a small group – here we call them Connect Groups - there’s things you can do in circles that you can’t do in rows. But it’s better to say you need to be with a group of friends inside the church of at least equivalent

intensity to being in a small group. Where you see them regularly, you’re actually playing together, studying together, reading together, talking together, see? And therefore you’re really drilling the Christian faith into each other in a way that really changes you.

One last thing: What is the main reason that the younger brother is able to – not just become a hired man – but to become an *heir* again? Even though he’d squandered his inheritance, how could he be reinstated? And I hate to tell you the answer because we have to talk about this over the next couple of weeks at greater length, and I hate to always give away the end of the story – there’s always some bleed over with this parable. But here’s the answer; the only reason why the younger brother could become an heir and a son again is at the **expense of the elder brother.**

Do you see why? Because now all the inheritance belongs to the elder brother. And so the only way the father can reinstate the younger son is at the expense of the elder son. Now, the elder brother in *this* story hates it and we’re going to talk about that...but the elder brother in *our* story does not. Why? Because the true elder brother is Jesus Christ.

Because he came to earth to sacrifice himself and to give up his place in heaven so that *we* could have a place. To give up his place in the Father's family so that we could have a place. To lose his sonship, as it were, so that we could get full rights as sons. And the *knowledge* of that sacrificial love is what changes us and what will turn us into a family.

Ernest Gordon was a British soldier in World War 2. He was captured by the Japanese and he was made to work with thousands of others on what's called the "Death Railroad" – get your tickets today! But it was a railroad that ran along the valley of the Kwai River in Thailand. Prisoners of war were made to work on it and the conditions were so awful that basically 1,000 to 2,000 prisoners died for every 5-miles that was built – thus the name. They estimate – it's impossible to know for sure – but around 106,000 laborers died during construction.

And it got so bad that Ernest Gordon, in his memoir, said that the men were all at each other's throats, they went back to the law of the jungle. He says, "Death was everywhere and as conditions worsened, our lives became poisoned by selfishness, hate and fear. Formerly we had huddled together because of our fears, believing there was safety in numbers. We had still shown some consideration for one another. Now that was gone, completely swept away."

"Existence had become so miserable - the odds so heavy against us - that nothing mattered except to survive. We lived by the rule of the jungle read in tooth and claw – the evolutionary law of the survival of the fittest. It was a case of I look after myself and to hell with everyone else. Everybody was his own keeper and all the restraints of morality were gone."

But one afternoon something happened; a shovel was missing at the end of the day. The officer in charge became enraged and demanded that the missing shovel be produced or else. And when no one in the squadron volunteered that they had taken the shovel, the officer got his gun out and threatened to kill every one of them on the spot. Suddenly one man stepped forward and said "I took it." The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel and beat the man to death on the spot.

But at the second tool check, this time no shovel was missing; there had actually been a miscount at the first time. The word spread like wild fire through the whole camp that an innocent man had been willing to die to save everyone else. The incident had a huge effect. Gordon writes, "We began to treat each other like brothers. Another man was caught trading with the local Thai people for medicines for a dying comrade and was sentenced to death. But he submitted to it, reading from a little Bible and cheering up the chaplain just before his execution. Death was still with us – no doubt about that – but we were being slowly freed from its destructive grip."

What happened? The sacrificial love of one man giving his life for the rest changed a jungle into a community. And that was just a human being. Jesus Christ gave himself for you. Jesus Christ stepped forward and was beaten into the ground to save us from our sins. Let that turn us into a family.

Let's pray...