

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 73 – THE CHURCH – LOVE IN ACTION ]

---

***Our focus has shifted to the role and function of the church.***

- ◆ We are looking at the role of the church through five virtues, faith, hope and love as expressed in 1 Corinthians 13, and worship and service.
- ◆ The church as the body of Christ needs to be people of faith, people of hope, people of love, people of worship, and people of service.

***Last time we looked at the subject of divine love as God has expressed it on a rebellious humanity.***

- ◆ As we saw His supreme expression of love to us was the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.
- ◆ We also spent quite a bit of time on how God exercises His awesome power and it is this factor that makes His love such a powerful force.
- ◆ Understanding this divine use of power in contrast to the world's use of force is crucial if we are to become loving citizens of the kingdom of God.
- ◆ So to see this divine use of power in a more tangible way, today we are going to look more closely at Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

***This parable is a fascinating revelation of divine love in action but it also highlights this use of God's divine power we have been talking about.***

- ◆ In reality this parable tells us more about the Father than it does about the prodigal.
- ◆ A better name for the parable would be, "The parable of the loving father."

***I have mentioned this before but we need to regard this parable in the broader context of the relationship between a loving God and a rebellious humanity.***

- ◆ The Father had created the perfect environment in Eden for mankind to relate to Him in love and communion, yet humanity rejected His overtures of love in much the same way the prodigal does in this story.
- ◆ Yet this same God we rejected provides the means for our reconciliation and then welcomes us back with open arms.

***We begin by looking at the preamble to the story in Luke 15 as this sets the scene for what later transpires.***

- ◆ The chapter begins with the Pharisees and religious teachers criticizing Jesus for associating with sinners and tax collectors—even eating with them!
- ◆ Right from the beginning of this story we see a powerful demonstration of God's love, His concern for the outcasts and the less desirable in society.
- ◆ Then to add insult to injury, Jesus responds with the parable of the lost sheep, showing the unconditional love God has for the lost.
- ◆ Also it is the good Shepherd who initiates the search for the lost. In fact, He leaves the 99 other good sheep in church while He goes looking for the lost.
- ◆ It's as if the 99 are incidental to the story.
- ◆ Neither does He wait for the lost to become good law abiding, God fearing, respectable citizens before going after them.

***Jesus then follows up with the parable of the lost coin.***

- ◆ Again, the emphasis is on the lost. The other nine coins are almost incidental.
- ◆ So we need to approach the parable of the prodigal in the same way, with the emphasis on the attitude of the father towards the "lost" son.

***Parable of the lost son.***

- ◆ The story begins with the younger son demanding his father give him an early share of his inheritance.
- ◆ He is really saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead, that way I can get on with my life instead of wasting my time in this boring environment."
- ◆ Very similar to what Adam and Eve told God. "We want to experiment a bit ourselves without you constantly looking over our shoulder."
- ◆ And as in the case of Adam and Eve, the father, being the gentleman that he is, and despite the fact he has within his power the right to refuse the son's demand, he honors the son's decision and allows him to go off on his own and learn the difference between good and evil.
- ◆ The father in his wisdom knew arguing with his son at this point was futile, but if reconciliation was to happen down the road, he knew he had to leave the door open for that possibility.
- ◆ But it also highlights the sacrificial nature of love for the sake of the other, reflecting Jesus' new command to His disciples, "Love as I have loved you."
- ◆ Sacrificial love as the name implies is going to cost us something in time, energy or resources. But this is the price of godly relationships.

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 73 – THE CHURCH – LOVE IN ACTION ]

---

- ◆ The theme of sacrifice is one of the major themes woven throughout the biblical account, right from the beginning when animals were sacrificed to clothe Adam and Eve, the account of God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, this parable about the father sacrificing his estate, and of course the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for the sins of mankind.
- ◆ In each of these accounts what is highlighted is the sacrifice one is willing to make on account of preserving the relationship with the other.
- ◆ But the father knew reconciliation with his son would only come at a cost. It had already cost him half his estate, and he knew it would cost his wayward son a lot of pain and heartache in the interim.
- ◆ And it wasn't long before the son found out; life wasn't all it was cracked up to be without the security and involvement of his father.
- ◆ Precisely the message that mankind has learned down through the ages – "life without God is hell!"
- ◆ But that is the point isn't it? Sin is painful. It has been designed this way to help bring us back into a relationship with the father as in this case.
- ◆ The other important factor working behind the scenes to bring about reconciliation is the good Shepherd we just read about in the first part of this chapter is actively pursuing the lost sheep.

***These two factors working together, the pain of sin and the pursuing love of the good Shepherd brought the wayward son back to his senses and he decided to return home where things weren't quite so boring after all.***

- ◆ ***V.18 I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, 19 and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man." '20 "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.***
- ◆ Of course the Pharisees listening, would have expected a totally different response from the offended father after being treated with such disrespect earlier.
- ◆ In fact, the father's behavior is totally foreign to human behavior – this again was a divine act.
- ◆ A human reaction would have been more like, "You've got some nerve coming back here after all you've done to bring shame and dishonor on our family."
- ◆ Again, the power resides with the father, but notice his reaction.
- ◆ ***V.21 His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' 22 "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. 23 And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, 24 for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.***
- ◆ As we saw last time, God wants to win us over with conquering love rather than brute force.
- ◆ Jesus in this parable is revealing the true nature of the Father. He is as gracious, compassionate and kind as Jesus is...in reality they are, and act as One.
- ◆ One of the great heresies of Christianity is to label Jesus Christ as the compassionate "good cop" and the Father as the angry "bad cop," whom Jesus has to placate so He will accept sinners back.
- ◆ The danger of this type of thinking does great damage to the unity of the Trinity.
- ◆ The truth is, the Father is just as involved in the redemption of mankind as Jesus is.
- ◆ ***John 5:19 'The Son can do nothing of Himself, but only what He sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise.'***
- ◆ So instead of a good dressing down and a terse command to be on his way, the father does the unthinkable, he runs to his son and welcomes him back into the family.
- ◆ Jesus is revealing the true nature of the Father's conquering love towards His rebellious children even though they have caused Him grievous pain.

***However, lurking in the shadows of this extravagant display of grace is the party pooper.***

- ◆ He's been going to church every Sunday, he's faithfully paid his tithes, and he's been the loyal son slaving away around the farm.
- ◆ ***V.25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house..."***
- ◆ Another irony of the story is that everything the prodigal left home for, the music and dancing, feasting and laughter, friendship and happiness, wealth, security was right there at home all along.
- ◆ ***V.26 and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 27 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' 28 "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in.***

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 73 – THE CHURCH – LOVE IN ACTION ]

---

- ◆ Notice again who takes the initiative? The father.
- ◆ ***His father came out and begged him...***
- ◆ The father's love is not just extended to the son whose sin is obvious, but also to the one whose sins may not be quite so apparent.
- ◆ God the Father is concerned with the salvation of all, even these self-righteous Pharisees represented by the elder brother in this story (2 Peter 3:9).
- ◆ In fact the father, like Jesus, is even willing to suffer personal indignity and humiliation if it is going to facilitate reconciliation (Philippians 2:5-8)
- ◆ Here he is begging his son to come join the party, while earlier we saw him running to welcome home his wayward son.
- ◆ Both of these behaviours would have been considered shameful in the cultural norms of the times.
- ◆ So again, we see this demonstration of sacrificial love.

***Back to the story and, oh, oh, here comes the list of sacrifices I've made for you over the years.***

- ◆ ***V.29 but he replied, 'All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. 30 Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.'***
- ◆ The obscenity of God's grace is that it is so unfair.
- ◆ It will drive you crazy if you're in the game of keeping score.
- ◆ But it is only unfair to those like the older brother and the Pharisees who are playing the game of keeping score.
- ◆ Problem is, it's not the game God is playing. He is in the game of grace, saving sinners in whatever form they appear.
- ◆ And when he does, He welcomes us back with open arms and throws a big party.
- ◆ ***V.31 "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. 32 We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!' "***

***The mystery is, we don't know how the elder brother responded to the father's invitation. Did he stay outside sulking or did he come inside and join the party?***

- ◆ The reality is, all of God's children need saving from sin and it's a mistake to think our long list of sacrifices in some way contributes to the process.
- ◆ This type of thinking is delusional on two fronts.
- ◆ First, it underestimates the extent of God's love and grace towards sinners.
- ◆ Second, not only does it demonstrate a mistaken concept of God and His grace, but it also devalues the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice.
- ◆ To think we somehow contribute to our own salvation is really saying Christ's horrifying sacrifice on the cross is not enough to free me from my sins.

***So what are some of the takeaways about God's love we can learn from this parable?***

- ◆ God, both Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their grace, are concerned with the salvation of all peoples, whether they be the undesirables Jesus ate with, the prodigal son or the judgmental brother (John 12:32; 2 Peter 3:9).
- ◆ God, because love involves choice, honours our freedom to choose our own path, as in the case of Adam and Eve, the prodigal, and the older brother who was faced with the decision as to whether or not he would join the party.
- ◆ Even though He honours our decision, He will do all in His power including the sacrifice of His own beloved Son, the good Shepherd, to bring us back into the fold (John 3:16).
- ◆ Even though He has absolute power to bring all to their knees, He chooses instead to win them over with all-conquering sacrificial love (Romans 5:8).
- ◆ God's goal is to win us over with persuasion, not coercion (Irenaeus).
- ◆ The final thing we learn about this God who is love is that He likes to party, especially when one of His wayward children comes back home (Luke 15:7, 10, 22-24).