

Repenting Our Resentments

Luke 15:1-2, 25-32

Farmville Baptist Church

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You know, sometimes I stand to preach a sermon and find that it is an intellectual exercise for me. Oh, I'm not saying I don't strive to find applicability to my own life, and hopefully to yours as well; I do. But sometimes, the text before me, the leading of the Spirit, is to preach on a topic or a word of Scripture that I find little personal connection with. This isn't unusual; the Bible is a big collection of texts across time, geography, and theological perspective, and it addresses the concerns of a wide variety of life's experiences. For many years, for example, I would find occasion to preach about marriage or parenthood before I ever found those topics of particular applicability to me personally. That's just

how the Bible is, how church is – we are a community of people gathered around the text of a community of many people, and sometimes the message shared isn't exactly for us, right then and there, but for someone else. The comfort or challenge we hear is indirect or hypothetical at times.

My friends, today isn't one of those days, at least for me.

You see, I don't remember a time I wasn't a Christian.

Oh, sure, I remember walking down the aisle at Maysville Baptist Church and giving my life to Jesus. I remember getting baptized and then going downstairs to the fellowship hall for a reception. I remember working carefully through a workbook for new believers – but, to be honest, I wasn't a new believer. I had always been a believer. I grew up, thankfully, in the home of devout Christian parents. We were at church multiple times each week, I attended every Bible School in town, and I knew the words to every song in

kids' choir. More than that, I could tell you the stories of Jesus and Joshua and Joseph, not to mention Peter and Paul, and I did my primary-aged best to live out the commands taught in the Scriptures. And after my "conversion," though I hadn't really converted from anything, I continued my efforts to be faithful. I didn't always succeed – but I never truly went off the rails.

Simply put, I never was the younger son in the parable from Luke 15. I never wandered so far from home, either earthly or heavenly, that I squandered my inheritance in a far distant country. While I've made my fair share of poor choices, none brought me to the brink the way that the young son's did, and the journey of repentance was never as far as his.

I can say that today with complete honesty – and also without an ounce of arrogance, because there is another

brother in the story, equally in need of repentance as his younger sibling, and far too often I've been just like him.

You may have, too.

So let's take a few minutes today to look at the *other* brother in the parable of the prodigal son – the one who wasn't so prodigal, but who needed to repent just the same.

The elder son, the older brother, exhibits many of the typical traits of an older child: he is the responsible one, the dedicated one, the dutiful one. He works hard in the fields, never daring to go to a far distant country to sow wild oats; the closest he comes to indulging his carefree side is to think about having a small party for his friends. Not to actually have it, mind you, but to think about it. The older son knew that he was the first heir to the estate, the one responsible for caring for both his father in his old age and the family land that provided for all of them. He couldn't lose his focus, his

commitment, his work ethic – too much was riding on him. And so he kept his head down, his nose to the grindstone, and did what he needed to do.

Not at all like that brother of his, the scoundrel!

I get the sense from the parable that the older son had long lost any real affection for his younger brother. Maybe as children they were good friends, companions, and comrades, but somewhere along the way, they chose divergent paths. This isn't all that unusual; Jesus's parable is indeed striking in part because it reflects so much of what we know from our own family dynamics and the dynamics of the families around us. Older siblings tend to be responsible, dutiful, and a bit scornful of their more carefree younger siblings, while the younger siblings tend to be less committed to some family mission and more willing to go off on a whim. Not

every family reflects this pattern, mind you, but it's common enough to be relatable to just about everyone.

And so we aren't surprised ~~when~~^{that} the older brother reacts badly when he finds out his wayward sibling has come back home, penniless and destitute, and his father is throwing him a celebratory feast full of excess and revelry. First of all, he's out in the field, working. He's doing what he's supposed to do, responsible man that he is. Then, no one even comes to tell him his brother is home – he has to hear the sounds of the party and find out what was going on himself. And then, as the kicker, he ~~finds~~^{discovers} out how extravagant the feast is – they kill the fattened calf for it, after all – and he figures out that, essentially, he is paying for his brother's welcome home bash. Remember, there are two brothers to inherit the father's estate – and the younger brother has already received, and squandered, his share. Whatever is left is

promised to the elder son – and now it's being used, wasted in his mind, on a party for his scofflaw brother.

I'm sure we aren't surprised to find that the older brother is a little ticked off.

In fact, if you're anything like me, you can probably put yourself right in his sandals and feel something pretty similar to what he felt. We have done what we were supposed to do, kept our nose to the grindstone, colored inside the lines, waited our turn, and been responsible with our resources in life – and we ^{see} someone else, someone who has made some pretty bad decisions, maybe, or who we think has squandered their God-given gifts, and we are jealous or judgmental or frustrated or angry that they are receiving affirmation or blessing or success. This is true even if their success is momentary or milder than our own, but is even more true if they receive adulation or benefit beyond what

we receive ourselves. It is easy to develop feelings of anger, bitterness, and resentment towards those who have been less responsible or dutiful than us and yet have been forgiven and welcomed home.

The thing is, such feelings on the older brother's part are just as problematic in the parable as the younger son's, requiring repentance just as much – because falling into the well of resentment and judgment is just as far from the heart of our loving Father as the far distant country of poor choices was for the wayward younger son...even though us older brothers and sisters never leave home and never squander our Father's blessings in wild living or monumentally poor choices.

I mentioned last week that Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was instrumental for me in my understanding of the parable, and this is perhaps most

impactful for me in his treatment of the older son. Nouwen points out,

“Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man.

Exteriorly he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but, interiorly, he wandered away from his father.

He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly bitter. [...] There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home. And it is this lostness – characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy – that is so pernicious and so damaging to the human heart.”¹

We can sense it, can't we – the simmering anger, the deep well of resentment bubbling up in the older son as he fumes in the darkness, hearing the party but refusing to go

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 69 & 70.

in? He'd rather stand alone, hungry, and upset in the night than go in and enjoy the best food and the revelry simply because its in honor of his brother's return – and that's just unfair!

I've been that older brother. Many of you may have been, too. And, like Nouwen said, the elder brother has placed himself far from the Father's love, and he needs to repent.

Of course, the father in the story makes an opening for his older son to turn back from the path of sinful brokenness, the far distant country right at home where he feels himself “to be the most misunderstood, rejected, neglected, and despised person in the world.”² Having been told the responsible one is refusing to come into the party, the loving father goes out to him. Just as he ran to the younger son, he

² Nouwen, 72.

goes to the older son to bring healing and reconciliation. He listens to his child's grievances patiently, not belittling them but putting the situation in context. And then, the father waits. Just as the younger son had to take a step of repentance, turning away from one path and turning towards another, the father couldn't repent for the older son. The older brother had to take a step, too.

We don't know if he ever did. Unlike the younger brother, the story of the older brother is not resolved. Maybe Jesus didn't finish the story because he wanted the Pharisees and teachers of the law to wrestle with it for themselves. And maybe he wants us to, as well. Henri Nouwen points this out in his concluding thoughts on the parable: "Unlike a fairy tale, the parable provides no happy ending. Instead, it

~~leads~~ us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love."³

You see, that's the rub of it. We want God to be all-forgiving, forever welcoming...for us. But when we see others being welcomed back, if we're not careful, if we're not attentive of our own resentment and jealousy, we can slip into a perspective that is not God's at all. We want forgiveness and mercy for ourselves – but not for *those people* (whoever they are) who have wandered in the far distant country and squandered everything in questionable or immoral ways. We did better than they did, after all – why are they deserving of the Father's love and grace? The truth is that they're not – but neither are we. And that's what we lose sight of if we become like the older brother.

³ Nouwen, 75.

So we are left with a choice. We can choose to rejoice with the Father over the return of his son – or we can choose to be resentful in the darkness while the party goes on without us. We can choose the path of joy or the path of resentment, but not both, because, as Nouwen says, “Joy and resentment cannot coexist.”⁴

So, today, will we choose to trust in God’s all-encompassing, ever-forgiving love and grace? If so, we recognize that it is for us and for all who embrace it, even if their sin is not our sin and our sin is not theirs, even if we may unconsciously feel like we deserve it more. Trusting in God’s all-encompassing, ever-forgiving love means trusting in it for everyone – even scoundrel younger brothers who are welcomed home with a party. And if we do trust in it, we join our Father in the celebration, rejoicing over the return of a

⁴ Nouwen, 73.

wayward child of God. But that means repenting of something, too – turning away from something that, for me and maybe for you, is far too comfortable and familiar, an outlook that is far too easy to embrace. It's turning away from the perspective that others are somehow worse than us, that our rule-following and personal piety and dutiful acts of responsibility mean that we're better than those we may encounter who have made some poor choices in life.

I pray every day that this is a repentance I choose – to turn away from resentment and to turn towards joy. I don't always make that choice, but I want to, because I know it is the path that Jesus walked, it is the path God calls me to, and it is the path of the life most worth living. Will you join me today in repenting of your resentments, bitterness, frustrations, and jealousy? Will you repent of being the older son?