

Love God

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[0 : 00] Okay, just for a short while this evening, we're going to look back at the prodigal... a bit of the prodigal son story. So, this is the start of a three-part series that I mentioned.

It's called Passing Thoughts, okay? And it's a theme of three loving God tonight, loving one another, and then loving the lost. These are the three kind of themes that I would like to leave with you as we come towards the end of January, and we move to a new chapter down in Leith. I hope you'll be able to stay away, particularly those who are away, at the weekend.

But as Brian said this morning, it was a spa weekend we were on, so we're all pretty refreshed, and I'm not sure what particular glasses he was wearing when he thought that was the case, but... and just for your information, Brian, we were singing bangers of hymns at the weekend away, because I heard you were making mockery of our hymn choices as well. So, just to keep Brian in his rightful place, and I heard that he preached a banger of a sermon this morning here, we also had great messages from Bob, who shared, actually, quite a lot of what I was going to say.

So, every time he said something, I said, oh, dear, that's the same thing as I'm going to say, but... But what I'm going to do is not really... they're not really sermons, okay, as such.

They're not the kind of normal sermons that you... well, maybe you'll think they are, but not the normal sermons. The kind that you need all through the year. You might not want to call them sermons or preaching. They're really just passing thoughts that are based on God's word.

[1 : 41] But I hope they'll be quite towards the end, maybe not so much tonight, but certainly the next two will be more heavy on application specifically towards St. Columba's moving forward. So, again, if you're visiting, I apologize, but I'm sure it'll still be relevant at that level to us individually as we think about these things. So, tonight I want to speak about the importance, and this is really important for all of us, just the importance of loving God. And to look at that by not really looking at the parable, particularly that it's a really well-known parable of the lost son, really famous story. And I think it's probably my favorite... it's definitely my favorite parable. It's one of my favorite parts of Scripture, because it's so rich and it's so deep, and it's so revelatory as a parable of what God wants us to think about Him, the kind of God He wants us to think about, or the character of the God that He wants us to understand and know.

And I love it. I mean, I can't remember ultimately who it was who said this. It's been attributed to different people, that the gospel of John is a gospel in which elephants can swim and toddlers can... and children can paddle. And that's true of the gospel of John. It's also true, I think, of this parable. You can go into great depths in this parable for many different mature believers can find amazing truth in it. But it's also very simple, and I think that's... it's genius, and it's the inspiration of Scripture for us. But I really want to focus on the father here in the story. And Bob, actually, we can spoke quite a lot about the fatherhood of God for us as believers. Because I think it's hard for us actually to love... well, maybe not for you, but I find it hard in many ways to love God. And there's different reasons for that, I think.

One is because we can't see Him. You know, we're used to loving what we can see, and the relationships are about who we can see. And we find that to love a person by faith in a faith spiritual relationship. It's quite a difficult thing to do for us. So there's a difficulty in loving God because we can't see Him. I think also because we're in the minority here in Scotland, in the... you know, in the world in which we live, there's not many Christians.

So we don't have a lot of support. It's why church is... one of the reasons church is so important. But there's not many other people in your school or in your university or in your workplace or in your neighborhood who also love Jesus unpopular to love God and love Jesus Christ. That makes it hard as well. And I think it's hard sometimes because we still have a remaining sinful nature in us. We're still rebels and that may... it's uncomfortable for us to think about that. But sin in our lives, our

rebellion against God, which we were born with naturally and have against of remains in us even as Christians to a degree. And that hard wires us to see God negatively, to see Him as harsh and to see Him as... that's what sin does. It twists the relationship. So we see God in a negative and in a harsh way, a killjoy, someone who's oppressive and someone who we are right and free to challenge. And sin, I think, also makes us jealous of his rightful place.

I don't mean in terms of being on the throne of the universe, none of us aspire necessarily to that. But to be the kings of our own lives, as it were, the queens of our own lives, the rulers of our own lives, he challenges that. And that remaining sense of independence within us makes it sometimes hard to love God. And I think the other thing within our sinful nature is that self-justification permeates everything about us, that we want to earn what we have, earn who we are, do it because we deserve it, and we find grace. And the helplessness of having to accept something because we can't earn it, we find that as believers, I think, with sinful nature is remaining and is very difficult. So it makes us bend towards legalism all the time, that we must earn our favor with God, that we must do something to earn His love. And that's a challenge for us. But here we see an amazing picture of God that I hope helps us to love Him better and to keep that focus as you go into this year and into a new chapter of life at the Seat Club. It's the prodigal God. This is Jesus' divine mind painting a picture of our Heavenly Father. And it's a remarkable picture. And we're going to focus on just Him here.

[6 : 56] And it's a great picture because it enables us to see God almost from a human perspective, because we can understand. That's why Jesus gave us parables. Jesus' great stories because they help us. I'm terrible at stories. I've got to learn. But Jesus' great stories that help us understand impossible truths. And here He gives us an amazing story. To illustrate who God is and the kind of Father we can really appreciate and understand as God. And what do we see about Him?

Very briefly here we see He's incredibly generous to His ungrateful sons. Now, I'm not sure I ever noticed this before until I was reading it again this week. In verse 12 we're told, and He divided His property among them. Father, give me a share of the property, says His Son.

And it says, and He divided His property between them. So even at that point He's got two ungrateful sons as we go on to see one of them who's a grump, who's a misery guts, who's a total legalist, and who is not really very loving in any way. And then He's got this other son who basically wants him dead and He wants his money. And He gives them both generously what they don't deserve.

Clearly, He divides his inheritance with them. We don't know what the elder son did with it, but the younger son went on and just had a wildlife away from his father. But He was generous. There was no questions asked. He gave them what they didn't deserve. These amazing gifts.

And as the story goes on, of course, we learn of what happens to the prodigal son. But in reality, it's probably a story about the prodigal father, prodigality of his love. But he, in verse 21, it's such a great picture of God the Father. In verse 21, the Son said to himself, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before you no longer were depraved by your Son, but the Father said to the servants, bring the fatted calf. Actually, sorry, verse 20, go before that He arose and came to his Father. But while He's still a long way off, His Father saw Him and felt compassion and ran and embraced Him and kissed Him. It's a great picture of the Father. It's a great picture of God, isn't it? He's waiting and He's longing for His child to come home. And it's a picture of salvation. It's a picture of the gospel without any mention of the full extent of the Father's love. There's no mention of the cross. There's no mention of atonement. There's no mention of sanctification. There's nothing. There's just this picture of the

[9 : 50] Father welcoming His Son back with open arms. And for me, there's a picture there of the cross, a Christ Himself on the cross with His open arms. That's maybe just making too much of it.

But it's a picture that does, I think, implicitly speak of the love of Jesus Christ in a remarkable way because it is Christ Himself, Christ the Son who becomes the prodigal on our behalf. Christ the Son becomes the one who is thrown into distant countries, who is cast out, who becomes a rebel in our place to be our redeemer. And He is the one who, having finished His work, and I may be obviously slightly twisting pictures here, but He's the one who the Father welcomes back into heaven with open arms and celebrates because of the work He's done and that Christ went to the cross on our behalf for the joy that was set before Him of knowing His finished work. Now, I know that that's not the actual application of the prodigal here, but it's deep down implicit in the story itself, is that we

have a Father who welcomes us with open arms when we come to Him because of what the Son did in becoming the one who was cast out on our behalf, who took the cost of our sins and who received us back to Himself. And then He celebrates. That's what we see about the Father. You see, the Son who's generous, the one who's welcoming with open arms and who then celebrates, who celebrates the return of the recalcitrant and rebellious Son. And that's the great thing that we can know and understand from Scripture, that every believer gets treated the same way as Christ was treated as He returned into heaven, victorious over death and grave and sin. Victory, joy, feasting, happiness.

God the Father this evening looks at you as a Christian just as He looks at His beloved Son with the infinite depth of love between Trinitarian Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

And that should change everything about how we think, about how we live, and about how we love in our own lives because of this love that the Father has for us. It does transform our characters. You know the difference in your life when you're unconditionally loved at a human level by your parents. You know the difference that makes. And you know what it's like when you see children who are not loved unconditionally by their fathers and mothers and how broken and how dysfunctional the lives can become because of that. You know what it's like to be brought up, or at least if you don't know, you long to understand and appreciate what it's like to be part of a family where you are loved in this unconditional and in this glorious way.

[13:06] But you know what it's like to be reconciled to someone you love when you've been divided and separated from them. You know that your demeanor changes, your face changes, your identity changes, your stability changes. And that's true at a human level. How much more is it true at a spiritual level when we grasp the love of God for us? It changes everything about how we live and how we think as Christians. So that's the kind of theological bit as it were of this passage over. But in 2024, what is it, what is that going to look like for you as a church family in St. Columbus? What is it going to look like for me as an individual as well? But for you, why is it so important that you've got at the foundation, at the bottom of your lives, at the core of your life, that loving God is primary? Or how can we make sure that that's the case?

Well, the first thing I think we have to do is, and there's just one or two things here before we finish. First is take stock and return to Jesus Christ and to God the Father in repentance. All of us need to do that. And the same as the prodigal did for the first time here, we need to always be doing that as a way of life. In repentance for not seeing God that way, repent of having such a small love in our lives that we don't really give Him all our heart and life is soul and everything that we are. Repent because the trouble in our lives is that we love other things more, isn't it? That we have many other functional gods before the living God because there's things we love more than Him. Our loves are continued to be disordered and we constantly need to be going back to the living God for forgiveness and for strength to love Him as we ought to do.

That's the transforming work of the Spirit in our lives. If the preaching of the Word here or if your understanding of the Christian faith is simply about stopping sinning, it's just about stopping sinning. That self-righteous legalism will just well up from your belly and it'll just be about the best you can do and trying your hardest and just stopping the negativity in a kind of outward way. We need to be people who deal with that because we're captured by a greater love and we see someone more beautiful, more perfect, more just, more strong, more dependable, more life-giving than we can currently see to see that God is love and that He has to be the source of our life and our future because of who He is. And that is a heart revolution for us.

But it's the understanding, it's the only understanding that breaks us free from legalism and from a cold and loveless relationship with God and with one another. So take stock and repentance are good words.

We don't use it enough and we don't do it enough. I think it's a great thing. As it's based on love because you know in human relationships the same thing, isn't it? For that relationship to deepen and grow, we need to recognize where we fail and fall and we come back and we come back stronger that way. So take stock and return on repentance. But also secondly, can I say strive this year to keep His loving company foundational to your walk of faith. Recognize that it's absolutely foundational. It's His gift, it can't be earned. It's something He gifts to us. We have nothing to offer Him but our own sinful repentance, our sin and our repentance. But we're called to rely on the Holy Spirit to enable us to see His love and to live it. So that means that maybe in 2024, if you haven't done it quite so much in the past, don't blame God for your circumstances. Don't blame other

people. Don't blame the church or whatever it might be. Don't look for everything else around you to change. But focus on your own heart and your own relationship with Christ. Focus on being [17 : 55] His child in the way that we're shown in this parable. Encourage you to wake up every day in 2024 and say, my father loves me like he loves his son, Jesus. I am His beloved son. I'm His beloved daughter. Even in the battle, even in the darkness, even when things are difficult, we wake up every day and say, I'm loved eternally. I'm loved through whatever life may throw my way. Meditate on that.

Listen to His voice. Pray to Him. Can I ask you to make time every day, not religiously, but lovingly to be in His company, to learn from Him? And I'd encourage you to change that routine. Don't always do the same way because it becomes ritualistic sometimes and it maybe becomes difficult for us freshen things up. Go for a walk up Arthur's seat and speak to Him there and be in relationship with Him. Listen to Him in different ways. Listen to the word read in different ways. Read it. Listen to it. Do different things. But be intentional about thinking through your relationship with God and continue always to be dependent on Him. Because when we go it alone in our Christian lives, it's like returning, it's like living in a pigsty. Spiritually, it's a spiritual pigsty that we choose when we leave our fatherly loving God out of our hearts and out of our lives. And you know, it's amazing what we content ourselves with when we lose sight of His love. We quite like wallowing in a pigsty sometimes. But we need time to break us out of that and to see the glory and the beauty of our relationship with Him rather than see it as a legalistic or a harsh thing. So that's the second thing. Try to keep His loving company foundational. Thirdly, recognize the role Sincese has in helping you to know the love of God. That's what the church is about. That's the priority of the church is to teach us and to show one another how to live in communities of family and how to love God. What is it that, you know, take a few minutes just to think about what you think Sincese and the church, if you go another church, what that church is about.

[20 : 23] What's it about? It's about personalities, it's about community, it's about religion, is it just an institution? Is it something that really only matters to the guy who's always up the front and is involved in the life of the church and for everyone else it's just peripheral?

Or do you never really think about what church and Sincese and gospel community is about? Well, it is to be a place that actually reflects heaven. It's a shadow of something far greater that we look forward to because God is with us and God is in us through His Spirit. It's to be a worshiping place, it's to be a community of worshipers who love God and who reflect that love together. And it's to be a place that elevates the love of God to all who belong.

So when we come to worship on a Sunday, which is part of what we do, a very important part of what we do, prepare. Make it a priority coming to worship, not an optional extra but a priority. So, today, see the open arms of Jesus Christ at the door, the open arms of the Father at the door as it were. I'm not saying you see Christ in a building in a way that's different from anywhere else in your life but it is a place where we're all gathered together and a place that should inspire our personal life of worship. And understand that that's the role, see the preaching, see city groups, the engine room, seven days of prayer, one to seven one prayer or grace groups or anything else. It's there to help you and me love God better. That's what it's there for. That's to be the priority in terms of the decision-making of what's important in St.

Columbus. That will it help us make God better. That's a vision, that's a priority, that's why we exist. And can I just ask in conclusion just to take personal responsibility towards that over this year. Leaders in the church, elders, deacons, all different kind of leaders, women's pastoral team and any who's leading in any way. Remember that you're called to promote God's prodigality and the prodigality of His love. That's what you're to teach, that's what you're to example. That's what's to be important about your role. That's the most important thing in your role. That's your calling, that's your priority. That's to be your... He is to be your example and you're to show that example to others. And you're to help Corey in his preaching to make sure that that is always the end and the focus and the perspective that he's bringing from the pulpit and whoever else is preaching in the pulpit. Ever and always is the love of God in our lives,

[23 : 26] His leaders, that's tremendously important. And as a church family, as all of us in a church family learn to see the church as a canvas where we paint out the love of God and where we show it and where we live it. See everything through the lens of God's infinite love for you.

And how can I reflect the Father's love through my involvement in His family here in St. C's? Do I see the role of the church to help me love God more and worship and discipleship, an example in

trials and failure? And how can I help others to love their Heavenly Father more? I'll probably say a bit more about that next time we meet. But I really want you to think about the place St. C's has in helping you to grow your love for Christ. It's a very important thing that we recognize and see that that's the primary importance of the church, is to glorify God and to worship Him in such a way that enables us to love Him more. It's not a human institution. It's not even a human family. It's not even just a community. It's worshiping people who seek to put the love of God at the very core of all we are. And that has huge implications for the way you think about church, the way you think about the priority of church, the way you think about the priority of St. Columbus, the way you think about one another within the church. He is our Father. Jesus Christ is what we're seeing earlier on today is our elder brother and we are brothers and sisters in Him. And in order for all of that to happen, prayer remains the key. It must always remain the key. It must always be key to this church's survival, both individually and corporately. [25 : 28] It must be. And so I'm just finishing with a well-known C.S. Lewis Quote, which is one of my favorite quotes of all time when he speaks about prayer and the significance of prayer. And don't be surprised that I finish on this note. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me. And that's what we need here is that prayer life that enables us to see how much we need to be changed to love Him and how much we need His strength to love and focus on His love in our lives. It's that, for me, it's the greatest challenge is our remaining sin, which hardwires us to see God negatively, which wants us to crawl back onto the throne and which also demands that we justify ourselves, that we earn it. And he says, you don't earn it, you receive it. I mean, let's pray. Father God, help us to understand you better and help St. Columbus over this year as things are changed and as new chapter begins, we pray that that wonderful and changing reality might be the foundation of the ongoing growth and blessing and a multiplication of blessing in the year ahead. We pray that might be the same for us and Leith and for every church in the city and beyond. We pray that we would keep our minds focused on what is primary because it reminds us of, or it's the foundation for everything else.

And Lord, help us to keep in mind that glorious picture of a father longingly waiting for his child to return and running with open arms and celebrating joyfully in the glory of reunion and of reconciliation. And may our lives be celebratory and our spiritual lives reflect that celebratory nature. Forgive us when we're far more like the elder brother who has that legalistic streak. Forgive us when we're grumpy and dull and judgmental and self-righteous and demanding of God as if we owe or owed anything by you and deserve anything. Lord, help us, we pray, to see that spirit within us dissolved and dealt with by your amazing grace, by your amazing fullness of your love, by the finished work of Jesus which says it's done, it's finished. And to have that reality of love already expressed, He's given us Christ, how much more will He give us all things, all that we need to live our lives, even in the midst of things we don't understand, difficult and confusing and dark circumstances that don't make sense. May we hold on to this great fact, great truth of your fatherly love and a celebratory joy in being in a relationship with you. And may we see that as we pray, that you love to hear us pray, that you want us to pray, you want us to pray individually, you want us to pray together, you want always to hear us even when we don't want to hear ourselves sometimes and don't want to hear others. Lord, we thank you that you never tire of hearing our dependent cries to you. So may we find prayer at the very foundation of all we are and do and continue to be and do here. Continue with us as we return our thanks to you and praise for Jesus' sake. Amen.