

Surprised by Jesus (Praise Night)

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[0:00] We're going to read from Luke chapter 7, verses 36 to 50. One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, asked Jesus to eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table.

And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment.

And standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with ointment. Now when the Pharisees who had invited him, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is, who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

And Jesus answering said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, say it teacher. A certain moneylender had two debtors.

One owed 500 denarii and the other 50. And when they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both. Now, which of them will love him more? Simon answered, the one I suppose for whom he canceled the larger debt.

[1:12] And he said to him, you have judged rightly. Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, do you see this woman I entered your house? You gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.

But he who is forgiven little loves little. And he said to her, your sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, who is this who even forgives sins?

And he said to the woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. This is God's holy word. We're going to read the story of the prodigal son from Luke chapter 15, starting in verse 11 of that chapter. And Jesus said, there was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the share of property that is coming to me. And he divided his property between them.

[2:26] Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property and reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread? But I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. And he arose and he came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced and kissed him.

And the son said to him, father, I've sinned against heaven. And before you, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate.

[3 : 41] For this son, for this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. But he answered his father, look, these many years I've served you and I've never disobeyed your command.

Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when the son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate. And be glad for this brother, your brother was dead and is alive.

[4 : 44] He was lost and is found. This is God's holy word. Now, this is a very famous story, the prodigal son story. We today live in what the sociologists are calling a new cultural landscape.

And that new cultural landscape is a movement from what was labeled post-modernism into what lots of people today called meta-modernism. Post-modernism was a movement that we've all lived through that was about doubting everything and questioning everything and deconstructing everything.

And the meta-modern is one, so many things it is. And we're trying to understand this cultural landscape we live in. But the meta-modern is a return to some of the authorities that the post-modern world pushed away.

So that's why so many people in our community, our society today, very different from a decade ago, are returning to religions. And it used to be even 10, 15, 20 years ago that religion was the bad guy in the culture.

But today, religion is acceptable in the culture again. And it's not that people are merely turning to ancient authorities because of the question of truth. They're turning back to religions by way of aesthetic preference.

[5 : 59] It's an expression of the inner self, of personal desire, of just what you like. And so many of us will have heard of the quiet revival movement. The quiet revival has been sort of misunderstood.

There is something of a revival, but it's not a Christian revival. Instead, it's a revival to transcendence. So it includes all the religions. People are returning to historic religions and so many new religions.

And this is what some people have called meta-modernism, a little piece of it. Now that means today, most people in our culture, in our city, will say religion is a good thing again.

It's helpful for cultural. It's helpful for societal cohesiveness. It's helpful for moral order and education. And it also means that because people are saying religion is good for you, the broad understanding of religion and the contemporary culture is not only that religion is good for you, but that religion is for good people.

It's for making good people. Now, this is the most famous story Jesus ever told. And it is a surprise, the surprise in some sense of all of the gospels, because it says that Jesus came not to seek the religious, the good people, but the irreligious.

[7 : 17] That people, that Jesus came to turn what we think of as religion on its head. And the prodigal son story is a story that's probably well known to everybody in this room to some degree.

It's a story, of course, we've taught here at St. C's on many occasions. The last time was, I think, a couple of years ago. But you can't really look at the prodigal son story enough. You could probably come and teach it every single week and it would still be fresh.

And it says to us that the gospel entered the world to counter mere religion, that Jesus Christ came for those who know they have a need, for those that know they need grace.

And it leaves the religious person at the end of the story standing on the outside being beckoned by Jesus. Will you come in seeing that you too are in need of grace? That despite your decency, that you're also in need of salvation and redemption.

All right. So this story is often called, this parable is often called the prodigal son story. It's been misnamed. It should be the prodigal sons. It's about both sons.

[8 : 20] And to really understand it, you've got to see it that way. So we're going to be very brief tonight. And let's see simply first, who is this parable being spoken to? Then secondly, have a brief look at the younger son and then the elder brother.

All right. So first, who is this parable being spoken to? Now to see that, you got to go to the beginning of chapter 15, verses one and two. And we read that the tax collectors and the sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.

So Jesus is being surrounded by tax collectors and sinners and tax collectors and sinners are the two groups of people in the first century that the religious, the religious elite, the Pharisees despise most.

The word sinner here is just another name for a person who's committed public sexual scandal. So probably a reference to prostitutes. And the tax collector, of course, Jewish men who have gone in with the Roman government to collect taxes from the Jews.

And so these tax collectors and sinners, people who are hated by the religious elite are drawing near to Christ. And so in verse two, the Pharisees and scribes grumble saying, this man receives sinners and he eats with them.

[9 : 34] And so there's the Pharisees, the religious elite, the very decent people. They're so upset that these sinners, these public scandalous people have drawn near and Jesus has broken bread with them. He has eaten with them around the table.

And then the next line is, so Jesus told this parable. And so it's a section of three parables, but all the parables are effectively about the same thing. Now, who is he writing the parable to?

Who is he speaking the parable to? He tells the parable of the prodigal son, not to the prodigal sons and daughters, not to the sinners, not to the tax collectors. They are present all around them.

They're drawing near to him. They want to be in his presence. He says this parable, not for their benefit, but for the religious elite, for the people who were there grumbling, believing that I should be accepted because I'm a decent person.

And so he told the prodigal son story, not for the prodigals, but for the religious. That's who it was ultimately directed to. Now, secondly, that means that the main point is aimed not at not at prodigal sons and daughters who have been reckless, but at the respectable person.

[10 : 38] And so secondly, he's asking the respectable person to look first at the younger son. So the first half of the story is all about the younger son.

You could think of the parable in two acts. It's a stage play effectively, and there are multiple scenes throughout these two acts. So act one, the prodigal son, the younger son, and in act one, scene one, we've got verse 12.

And in verse 12, the younger son says to his father, father, father, give me the share of property that is coming to me. Now, this is a scandal. Every one of the scenes in the first act is a scandal. And the younger son comes to his father and he says, I want my inheritance. So if you're a younger son in the first century Greco-Roman Jewish context, you are owed one third of the family wealth. And so he's saying, I want my third. Now to say that to a father in an honor shame culture is to say to a father, I want you to be dead. I want you to die. I want my stuff.

[11 : 39] And the shock of the passage is the father does it. The father actually gives it to him. The father accepts this. And this isn't contemporary 21st century Western culture.

There's no banks. The father would have had to liquidate in order to get the cash to give one third of his wealth to his son and he does it.

Now, this is the shock of the passage. This, the shock of the passage is that the father would tear his life apart, would deconstruct his life to accommodate his son's rebellion.

And this is, this is a tale as old as time. This is where true religion starts to begin. This is the oldest story in all of human history.

It's from the beginning. From the beginning, humanity said to God, the father, father, I don't want you. I want your stuff. God made us and he gave us all sorts of gifts in this world and we turned around and said to him, I'm not interested in you.

[12 : 42] I just want the stuff you give to me. I just want my circumstances. And the shock of world history is that the father continues to provide for us.

It's called common grace. He continues to give his gifts even though we take the gifts and shake our fist at him. Now, when you start to see that about yourself, that's where true religion starts to begin.

That you and I are people who have taken the gifts of God and said to God, but I don't want the gift giver. And when you see that, if you're willing to admit that, you start to move on the path from mere religion, just being respectable, to true religion.

You start to begin to say, there is someone to whom I must be grateful. There is a gift giver that I must offer my gratitude. That's the beginning of the pathway of true religion.

And we're being told about it all in this story. Now, the second scene, verse 13 to 16, is this young man. He goes into the far country and it says that he was reckless. That's where we get the word prodigal in verses 13 and 14, reckless.

[13:46] He spends everything and he gets into such a destitute situation in the midst of famine that he starts working for a farmer, a pig farmer, and he becomes so poor that it says he desires even to eat the pods that the pigs were being fed.

Now, remember, who is this parable being told to? It's being told to the Pharisees and the religious elite. And if you're a Jewish Pharisee in the first century, there is nothing that is more known to you than the fact that pigs are desperately unclean in the Levitical law.

And that means we're being told here that this man has gone so far down into the pit that he has become less than the beasts because it says even he desires to eat the pods that the pigs were eating.

He's not even to their level. The Pharisees are thinking this young boy has become beastly. There's no coming back from this in their culture. And yet, in verses 17 to 24, scene three, it says that the young man comes to himself and he says, I'm a sinner.

I'll, he makes a plan. He says, I'll work it off. I'll come back to my father's household and I'll work for him as a hired hand, as a servant. And if I work long enough, if I put enough time in, I know I won't be a son, but maybe I could be accepted as a servant.

[15:08] And so that's his plan. Now, the religious crowd there would have been nodding.

Absolutely. If anybody is to be reconciled, the only way that they could ever do it is by earning it back over years and years and years and years of repayment, of paying off every one of their sins, of earning their favor back in their father's house.

And when this young man comes back to his father's house, he's got his plan ready. He's going to say, Father, I'll work for this many years. I'll do this, this many good works for you. And maybe then you'll call me servant again.

And his father sees him out on the horizon. And breaking every rule of a patriarch in the household of the first century, he rolls his robes up and he runs out to his son.

And before his son can say a word, he wraps his arms around him and kisses him on the neck. And he, you know, the son starts to give his plan. He starts to say, well, here's my plan, dad. I'm going to work for you and I'm going to earn your favor again.

And it's as if in the text, the father just stops him and says to the other servants, go and kill the fattened calf. Get my best robe, my signet ring, my sandals, put them on his feet.

[16:17] Whose robe is the best robe in the house? It's the father's robe. Whose ring is the signet ring of the family? It's the father's ring. He, he, he robes him in his own clothing.

He puts his family seal on his finger. And what we learn here is that you cannot earn your status as a son or daughter of the father. You cannot work your way into the father, the heavenly father's good graces.

Becoming a son or daughter of the king, becoming a son or daughter of the father is a status change. It is acceptance. It is by, by grace alone. There's no other way. You cannot work your way into sonship.

And so that means tonight that if you come tonight, some of you in this room are the prodigal sons and daughters, you are, you are the reckless spendthrift. You've, you've looked back at the past of your life and you say, I am the younger here.

No matter what you've done, no matter what you're doing today, no matter what secret sins you may be hiding in your life right now, there is a heavenly father who is looking for you out on the horizon, longing to run to you and wrap his arms around you in mercy.

[17:32] And you can come to him and you can receive forgiveness. And you will be called son and you will be called daughter and you will be bathed in his robe and his signet ring and his sandals and he will throw a feast for you.

Some of us tonight might be struggling as prodigal sons and daughters from the past. You might be wrestling and thinking, I don't, there's guilt in my life that I don't know that I'll ever get past. I just want to ask you one question and I'll move to the final thing.

Do you think that Jesus Christ died on the cross in the middle of history for your heavenly father to look at you forever with a frown on his face? Jesus Christ died in the middle of history so that for the rest of time, God the father could smile at you.

And so no matter what you've done, you can come tonight and you can receive his mercy. Now, it would be great to end. Let us pray.

But we can't for just a few minutes because that's not where the parable ends. The story is so happy in this moment, but yet there's an elder brother and this is the main audience are the elder brothers and sisters, the religious elite, the people who believe they are respectable and they're decent and they can earn their way into God's favor.

[18:45] And so here we have an elder brother who comes back from the field and he hears the party going and he says, what's happening here in verses 28 and 29? And notice in verse 30 how he even speaks to his father.

He refers to his younger brother as this son of yours. He's not my brother. I don't know him. He won't say brother anymore. And then he explains himself. He says, all these years I have slaved for you.

I've worked for you and you have never given me a party. You've never killed the fattened calf for me. Now, it's very clear how the elder brother, how the religious elite, how the respectable believes they earn God's favor.

And it's this. He wanted the father's benefits. He wanted the father's benefits, his stuff. He never wanted the father. He said, all these years I've been good for you.

I've been good to you and you've never thrown a party for me. He wanted everything the father would give him in life, all the inheritance. He never wanted the father and he wanted that inheritance by way of being good.

[19:50] He wanted to draw near to the father's stuff by way of his decency. And so the younger brother, the prodigal brother, he told the father outright. He was explicit about it.

He said, I want you to die. I don't want you. I just want your stuff. The elder brother was implicit about it. He said, I don't want a relationship with you. I just am here being decent so that I can get your stuff.

You see, you can be prodigal by way of spending your life in the most reckless living. You can be prodigal by being a very good person. You can stay far away from God by simply being decent.

As long as you stay respectable, you can say, if you stay respectable, you can say, I never need to draw near confessing my need for grace. And so you can be just as prodigal on the outside, on the inside, I should say, as the younger brother is on the outside.

You can be alienated from God by your sin and you can be just as alienated from God by your goodness. And so here, what we've got is salvation by morality in the elder brother's life.

[21:00] And if you, you're a person who approaches salvation as salvation by morality, you might be treating Jesus as a helper, as an example in your life, as an inspiration to be a good moral person, but he is not yet your savior.

He's not yet your redeemer. And so at the very end of the story here, all we get is a pronouncement. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this, your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found. The father says, look at the movement, the status change from death to life and your younger brother. And then the parable just stops. Why?

The ending is left for the scribes and the Pharisees to put themselves into. There's the elder brother standing outside the door, the threshold of the party and Jesus turns to the Pharisees and the scribes and says, will you come in?

And so he's inviting every one of us who believes in salvation by morality that our respectability and our decency is what's going to get us into the heavenly throne room instead of our confession of need, of grace.

[22:07] And he's just leaving it open and saying, will you come? Will you come and receive the open arms of the father as well? Will you confess your need? Now, let me finish with this. How do you come home to God?

You come home to God by saying, therefore, I'm unworthy. I'm a sinner. No matter how respectable your life may have been, I need to be rescued just as much as the prodigal sons and daughters down the road.

You come to the father by confessing your need. That's faith. That's clear in the passage. But, what's unclear is what some commentators talk about and that's this.

If God is the heavenly father who no matter what you have done, whether that's salvation by decency and morality or that's running away from him and spending your life in utter recklessness, no matter what you've done, all you need to do is come back to him and he will open his arms to you and he will accept you.

Is there any need for the cross of Jesus Christ? So, if God just forgives you, if he just brings you in, if he just accepts you no matter what, why in the world is there a cross at the end of the gospel?

[23 : 19] And here's what I think commentators miss when they suggest that, when they ask that question and it's this. Remember, he's talking to the Pharisees, the religious elite, the scribes, those who are grumbling at the tax collector and the sinner and what does he tell them?

He doesn't tell them one parable but three parables. Don't worry, I'm not going to teach all three. In the first parable, there's a shepherd and he loses one sheep and it says that he goes out into the far country to bring that sheep home again.

In the second parable, there's a coin, there's many coins and this woman loses one coin and she flips her house over just to find the one coin. She goes on the hunt, she goes on the search and in the third parable, there's a son, one of the sheep, one of the coins, one of the little bits of treasure of the father and he goes out in the far country.

See, in parable one, the shepherd goes and gets the sheep and brings them back and parable two, the woman goes and finds the coin and brings it back but in parable three, what's missing?

See, what would a true elder brother have done? A true, a good, a righteous elder brother would have said, Father, I will go into the far country and I will go and bring my prodigal little brother home again.

[24 : 49] I will go get into the muck of the pigs with him if I have to in order to bring him home. See, that's the real center of the passage. Do, do you have a true and better elder brother than this elder brother?

Yes, you do. Jesus Christ, he is the true and better elder brother, Jesus Christ, the righteous and he says in Hebrews, I am not ashamed to call you my brothers and sisters.

Jesus Christ went into the far country and got all the way into the muck so that he could bring you home again and the invitation is before you, will you come?

Will you come and receive the father's embrace? Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would give us faith tonight. We ask, Lord, that you would help us to see our need, that we are not saved by our morality, nor are we too far gone because of our recklessness.

And so, we pray, Lord, whatever condition we may be in tonight, that you would teach us the grace of your gospel, all because we have a true and better elder brother. And we pray for this grace to be received in Christ's name.

[25 : 59] Amen. Amen. Thank you.