



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

April 22/23 2017 - Jeff Bucknum

A Story of Two Sons - (Luke 15:11-32)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

This is going to sound weird, but I'm a real geek about political discourse. I have to kind of explain what I mean by that. I'm not massively interested in politics all the time, I find them interesting and stuff, but I find the debate interesting. I also find that politics are always going to be kind of the same, throughout the generations. You can sit and watch the news all the time and it's the same today as it was in 1987. It's the same stuff happening all the time, but the political discourse, the public speaking, I find really interesting. When politicians give their public addresses, I have to tune in. I just find it really interesting how they argue their points and what they have to say about things. I always find the teleprompter a little bit weird and think, "Oh, I wonder what that would be like to read things while you are pretending to look at people" and all that kind of thing. It's probably because, when I was in college, my degree was in speech and rhetoric, and so I had to study all sorts of speeches from ages past like Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech, or the *Gettysburg Address* from Abraham Lincoln, these brilliant speeches from ages ago. I really got interested in them.

What I have noticed, though, since I graduated from college in the mid- 1990s until now, is something maybe you have not noticed. Back in the 1990s, when you are a political candidate and you want to win people's minds to a particular issue or convince them of something, you would just throw out a myriad of statistics, right? The more science-y and the more "*Four out of five doctors say I am the guy you should vote for,*" or "*Our economy stinks because 100% of the people say so,*" or whatever the statistical research is that you have, and you had statisticians who would give it to you and you would just *kill* people with these statistics. People would listen and go, "That's really science-y and smart, so you must be right."

Now, though, that doesn't happen almost at all in any of the political speeches. Do know what happens? Instead, they just tell stories about people. You know? "There's a lady in Regina and she has two cats and she's affected by the former administration's policies and we're here to save them. Let's go straight to her and then the news media will go and take a picture of her with her cats and she's crying and everyone will....." The point is, the more that I can connect you to the story of a person, to the real feelings, and the emotions of a person, the more persuasion that I can utilize. You will be moved by stories more than statistics. That is what has happened in public discourse all over the place.



You know that to be true. That's why we like movies. If you want to make a point with someone and you make a movie about it, it's going to have more persuasive power than you just standing up and saying, "This is what I think about the world!" If you embedded that point in a story, it has *massive* power; to change the culture, to change the mind of your friend, and all sorts of things. Stories have always had that power. Jesus knew that, and that's probably why he told stories. If he wanted to challenge someone, critique them, or console them in any way, he often times told a story. Most of the things that we believe to be true about God, and the images in our minds about who He is, are formed by stories that the Old Testament has and certainly what Jesus did when he told stories. We call those the parables of Jesus. They were often times told in response to something that this critics believed and he told stories to try to provoke them a little bit.

Over the next few weeks, we want to study and look at some of these stories. In the absence of the sun, we are going to tell stories to make ourselves feel better [laughter]. It's going to be great. I really love these stories. Today, we are going to do one that I'm sure you have all heard, it's the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or, at least, that is what we usually phrase it. I would like to change the title to the Parable of the Two Sons because there are two of them and the point, actually, of the parable is really held kind of at the end with the second son. What we want to do is study this is two easy, obvious sections:

- 1) We are going to learn something from the younger son.
- 2) We are going to learn something from the older son.

[The Younger Son]

Let's look at the younger son, in Luke 15. It is going to start in verse 11, but, before we get to verse 11, I want to give you a little bit on context in verse one of Luke 15 because all of Luke 15 is part of one big response that Jesus has to his critics. Look at Luke 15:1,

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Listen, if you are a true prophet sent from God, if you are God's messenger, you would at least have enough sense to hang out with the right crowd, right? Who you don't hang out with is the tax collectors, the ones who were capitulating and partnering with the Roman oppressors, or the sinners (and by that he probably means prostitutes, it's the way the language is used). You don't hang out with the hookers and the tax collectors and have meals with them, basically saying that, “I welcome you into my life, you're my friend.” You hang out, instead, with the righteous, holy folks who wear ties and coats (that are of corduroy and black) [laughter]. That's what you do. You mingle with the right people. So, they are mad at him. They are mad at Jesus for *clearly* not being from God because he is hanging out with the wrong crowd. So, Jesus responds, not by saying, “You stupid Pharisees, here are four points I would like to make...” He responds by saying, “Let me tell you a few stories, and all of them are about lost things being found. There was a shepherd, who was out in his fields and he has a hundred sheep, and while they are travelling around he ends up losing one. He leaves the 99 and he goes out and finds that one, and, when he finds it, safe and sound, and realizes a wolf didn't take it, he grabs that sheep, puts it on his shoulders, and he does a little dance as he comes back.” That's what



God is like. He's the kind of God who is excited when He finds what was lost. When a sinner repents, when the prostitutes turn around from their way, and they come back to him, he throws a party. He's excited about that. That's what He's like.

It's like a woman who has some coins that she loses -- this is back in the day, of course, when coins in your pocket were not something you frequently had. You didn't have banks to keep those coins in anyways, you kept your coins in your home and they were usually your life savings. So, to lose your coins is, in many ways, akin, or worse, than you losing your wallet. Have you ever lost your wallet? You blame your wife [laughter] or, I mean, I blame my wife [laughter]. You blame your kids, then the dog, and then you find it in your back pocket. "Ahh, sorry guys! I forgot it was in my back pocket, but I am so *happy* that I have my wallet and I don't have to go to the driver's licensing now and I don't have to call the Capitol One people! It's so great!" Just this excitement that comes on you, that's what he says. This woman she looks all over her house and when she finds it she calls her friends and she says, "I found my coins! I'm so happy! Let's have a celebration about it!" That's what God is like. He calls all His God friends. He's so happy when He finds lost things. There is more celebration in Heaven over one sinner that repents than all the righteous who remain.

It's like there are two sons- and this is where he picks it up in verse 11,

"Jesus continued: There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them."

There's a little bit of cultural background that you need to understand here. This would not be viewed highly in our community either, right? If some kid- probably his age here is in his late teens- came up to as you, as a dad, and said to me, "Listen, here's the deal, I would like to have my inheritance now, Dad." By doing that, even in our culture, he is essentially saying, "I would prefer that you be dead. The things that you have, Dad, are worth more to me than you are." Now, as a father, you probably wouldn't be all that thrilled with that boy, in that time. In *this* culture, if a boy came to you and did that, as an honourable father, landowning, wealthy father that was highly regarded in his community, what you would be expected to do is to say to that boy, "Number one, get out! I am better dead to you than alive?! Fine, you get nothing! No inheritance for you! None! Second, everybody beat him!" What you find in this passage is what, though? Is that what the father responds when the son comes up and makes this audacious claim? No. What you get in this passage is the father saying, "Okay. You want it? Fine." There is a lot of grace, even at the beginning here. For him letting his son speak to him this way, and he gives him the money and the son responds in verse 13:

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had [which was a lot now], set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."



This boy's got a fistful of dollars now, right? I mean, he's liquidated all the assets, and he's got change in the pockets— ching, ching, ching— and he takes off to a far off land where people love to party, right? Vegas, or Paris, or Regina [laughter], or some place like that. He's going to head off, and he's going to have this great time. The language here is actually that he squanders his wealth, in the NIV. The language here is actually that he scatters it. It's the kind of thing you do with your seed if you want to throw it up in the wind and it just goes everywhere. This boy goes out and he's like, "Money! Make it rain!" and it just goes everywhere and he spends it on wild living. We learn later that it means hookers. It's probably a number of months that he has a really good time and probably collects lots of friends. Young men who are liberal with their cash tend to gather hangers-on. So, he is probably having a great, old time, but the problem is that the economy is not a very trustworthy thing. You spent all of your money wasting it on all of these things, but didn't set any aside for a rainy day. I mean, if you are 17 years old, there are no rainy days.

So, the famine comes, and he's got nothing. Now he's got to get a job, but the problem is his dad's not around and he doesn't have any connections. There is no indeed.com that he can check, so he has to go to whatever is available in a really bad job market, during a time of famine. So, he takes off and finds a place to work. Now if you are a little Jewish boy, there are certain things that you hate in the world. You are taught from a very young age to hate certain things, right? The Toronto Maple Leafs [laughter]... No, I'm kidding! You're taught to hate Gentiles, they are unclean. They are clearly not God's people. You are God's people, so God likes you better. So, don't hang out with the Gentiles, don't be with them, and certainly don't work for them. But, if you have to work for a Gentile, work for one that doesn't have pigs because pigs are *really* unclean (until you make them into bacon). Even then, you still shouldn't work with any pigs, you shouldn't do anything with Gentile pig farmers in particular. Where does this kid work? Out in the fields for a Gentile pig farmer. In fact, he *feeds* the pigs. You have got to picture this image at the end of this little section where he is basically holding a bucket, having emptied all the pot of peas into a trough, and had the slimy pigs, with their mud covered bellies, squeal by him, get up to that thing, and [oinks] go for it, right? He's standing there with the bucket just drenched in mud, thinking to himself in this epiphany moment, "This is not how I saw this going [laughter]." But he comes up with a plan. Verse 17,

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father."

Now listen, hired servants were day labourers. I don't know if you have ever been to a place in a world or seen pictures or videos of a place where a bunch of men in farming communities will gather to a certain location. The farmers will come by in their pickup trucks and in the beginning of the morning they will say, "I want four guys to come and work today on my farm picking up rocks, or pulling weeds, or whatever. You, you, you, and you, not you, you're too small, right? So you four." They come and they get in the car and you go off. Now, in this kind of situation, there is no guarantee of health insurance, or there is no guarantee of certain wages, it's only what you agree on on that day. If there are more people there, the guy can play the market a little bit and say, "Who will do it for this much?"



Who will do it for this much?" There is no guarantee that you will have the job tomorrow. There is no real guarantee that you'll have it beyond the first few hours of the day if you don't do a very good job. You are the lowest on the ladder at the farm, even *slaves* have a place to stay on the farm. They are considered property of the farm, and so the owner will take care of them more. The hired servants are the *bottom* of the barrel.

This kid's plan is, "I'm going to go back to my dad. I'm going to say 'Dad, I'm not worthy, clearly, of being called your son. But, if I could just be one of the hired servants, just work for you today, I'm going to at least have food to eat, more than I currently do.'" That's his plan. He gathers up the very few belongings he has and he takes off on the long journey, a very different journey than the long journey he took there. The feelings, of course, are very different now. Listen, when he is going on this journey, you have got to know that he is probably thinking about some of the holes in his plan, he should be. Little Jewish boys grow up learning the Old Testament law and they know what the law says about rebellious kids. Do you want to know what it says? Deuteronomy 21:18,

"If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son... [you know, the kind of son who might come and say he'd rather have you dead than alive, that kind] If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid."

When you grow up learning this law, you certainly would know as a kid that that kind of thing is a deterrent for you your whole life, and you have thumbed your nose at the deterrent, gone your own way, and you are returning on a long journey back to your father. There is a very real possibility that your father, when he sees you, will look at you and say, "We have an appointment with the elders." So, I know that you have heard this story so many times before so, as a result, you tend to run through the emotions of it, and the feelings that one would have at these turns in it. What you expect from the father is judgement; righteous indignation. He would be completely justified by everyone in the community, by all of his friends, to do that. That's the expectation, but what you get...

"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."

There was a series of events that lead to me courting my, now, wife. We had seen each other several times on the campus of Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. The real moment, though, where I actually got to know her a little bit, came when she needed a ride to the Seattle area—from Bellingham to Seattle is about an hour and a half. She needed a ride to the Seattle area so that she could dropped off at a friend's house so her parents could come from Eastern Washington state—which was a four hour drive— pick her up there, and take her home for Christmas. So, when I heard that she needed a ride to Seattle, and I lived right near the area where she needed to dropped off, I said, noticing that she was quite delightful and beautiful [laughter], "I'll take the hour a half drive with a



beautiful woman in the car, and drop you off.” Great, so it’s a plan! I said, “It’s a date.” No, I didn’t. It was a plan.

So, we got in the car together and at the beginning of the drive we started a little chit chat and then I thought, “Well, I’m going to wow her with my precocious wit at this point and give her many examples of how intelligent my opinions are.” I’m very free with those opinions at times. I was also at the time about 19 years old, so, like, stupid. I was in the car with her and I started telling her about my opinions about pastors. Now, her father has been a pastor, at that point, for about 25 years. She was a pastor’s daughter and had been at many different settings with that and she, at one point, after I had been talking for about ten minutes, said to me, “I think that everything you just said for the last ten minutes is complete and utter rubbish.” “Well, I don’t think that way at all so let me share with you a few more opinions I have about both that viewpoint and the other viewpoints you’ve had.” So we started having a “dialogue” in the car for the next hour and a half. We finally get to the location, it’s a bit heated— I mean, the time flies really fast when you have these “dialogues”. Have you ever noticed that?

So, anyway, I get to Seattle and say, “That was a quick drive.” I dropped her off, she opens the door, gets out, closes the door, I put the window down, and— she has her stuff on her shoulder— leans down puts her hand inside the car for a minute— just on the little door frame— she looks down and says, “Well... thanks.” And then she just went. I put the window up, and I drove. I was seriously only like three kilometres from my house. So, I was driving back home and thinking, “Oh man, you had an hour and a half with a beautiful woman in your car and all you could do was argue with her. You idiot!” So I go home. I told my mom about it. She said “You idiot,” [laughter]. “Well, whatever, there’s other fish in the sea.” My mom says, “You keep doing that, there aren’t!” [laughter] Totally, right? So, I finish Christmas break, had a couple weeks off, and came back to school. Now, she had left her coat in my car... *on accident?* [laughter]. So, I had to take it back to her dorm room when she got back to school, go down a couple floors to her dorm, and knock on the door. Then, she opens it up, and I said, “I have your coat,” and she says, “Jeff!” She lunges and put her arms around my neck and I’m like, “Hhhhhmmmm!?” [laughter] Hello!” and she said, “It’s so good to see you! I’m so glad that you’re back at school. It’s so great! We should get together and talk.” “Okay...here’s your coat and goodbye.” I remember walking down the hall.... “so there’s still a chance, right?”

This unexpected, delightful, complete turn of events, lunging at one... that’s what happening here! The language that is used actually in the original Greek is that he fell, the father falls, on the neck of his son. Father’s in this day are, again, highly honoured men, and if you are a land owning father and if somebody wants something from you, *they* come, *they* sit beneath you, *they* make their request, you wear a robe, and you have people to run for you. What you do not do is to lift that skirt up and start running like a seven year old girl, lunge at the person, hug them, and kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss... and, yet, that is what happens here. It’s completely *shameful*, yet so great... so great! Remarkable love.

Every year or so, I get an opportunity to share with the people of this church one of my favourite little pieces of writing from Philip Yancey’s great book, *What’s So Amazing about Grace*. He tells a story about a pastor friend of his whose daughter was battling him,



“She was fifteen-year-old. He knew she was using birth control, [this is how Yancey writes it] and several nights she had not bothered to come home at all. The parents had tried various forms of punishment, to no avail. The daughter lied to them, deceived them, and found a way to turn the tables on them: ‘It’s your fault for being so strict,’ she would say.

My friend told me, ‘I remember standing before the plate glass window in my living room, staring out into the darkness, waiting for her to come home. I felt such rage. I was furious with her. For the way that she would manipulate us and twist the knife to hurt us... And yet I have to tell you, when my daughter came home that night, or rather the next morning, all I wanted in the world was to take her in my arms, to love her, and just tell her I wanted the best for her. I was a helpless, lovesick father.’”

And that is what this boy finds. A father who is willing to break all social conventions, and just run, lunge, and kiss.

He’s got a speech prepared though, right? It’s a shame to waste a good speech. Verse 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.’ [You remember there is an ending to this speech. It has something to do with a hired servant, and put me out there and that sort of thing. He doesn’t even get to it. The father is like, “Babababa [waves hand].”] “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. [All signs of sonship. The family ring, *my* very robe, sandals to demonstrate that he is *my* boy. He bears the family name, with all the rights and privileges thereof.] Bring the fattened calf [you know the one that we’ve been keeping for a wedding, that we have raised his whole life. The *whole town* is going to gorge on this meal. Bring that one! This is *bigger* than a wedding.] and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

What you don’t get for this repentant boy— which is what he is, right?— Coming back on his knees, grovelling, basically, is a father saying, “So, you’ve come home. I suppose you’ve learned your lesson. Let us recount the lesson.” You just have a dad who is exhilarated with the return of his son. Look, the point here is really quite clear. What blocks forgiveness is never God’s unwillingness, but ours. His arms are always extended, we are the ones who turn away. Listen very closely to me. Regardless of what you’ve done, regardless with whom you’ve done it, regardless of where you’ve done it or when you’ve done it, God offers forgiveness and welcome if you are willing to come home. If you are willing to turn around, he is scanning the horizon ready to run. The solution to the problem for you is not away from God, it’s not hiding, it’s always toward Him.

Matt Chandler has a great little story that he tells about this woman— a 26 year-old single mother— that he got to know when he was a first year in college. He and some of his friends got to know her. She had lived a very rough life up until that point and the child that she had was the result of many of the sexual choices that she had made up to that point. They got to know her and they started thinking,



“This is a place that we can actually show kindness to her.” They offered to say, “Look, we’ll babysit your child and we’ll hang out with you. What we really want for you is to be helped in your life now, but what we really want for you is to know Jesus, who loves people just like you.” In fact, he told this story to her, shared it with her, several times. She was their friend. They finally asked, “Would you like to come to a concert that one of our friends is playing at? A couple of our friends will look after your child, and you’ll come with us for the evening. It’ll be great. We’ll go to dinner, and all of us will go to this concert. They went. When they went to the concert, of course, Matt— being a Christian guy— realized quickly that the concert wasn’t just a concert, it was the prelude to a sermon. So, when the time for the sermon came, the pastor stood up and here’s what he said...This is the way that Chandler tells the story:

“The minister got up and said, ‘Today I want to talk to you about sex.’ And I immediately thought, *Uh oh*. He took a red rose, smelled it, and showed how pretty it was. Then, threw [that rose] out in the crowd and told everyone, [all thousand people or so who were there] to smell the rose. ‘I want you to smell it and touch it and feel the texture of it, [pass it along so everyone else can touch it, use it]. He then began one of the worst, most horrific handling of what sex is and isn’t that I ever sat through... I’m thinking, with Kim beside me, ‘What are you doing?’ [Pastor, what are you doing?] As he wrapped up, he asked, ‘Where is my rose?’ Some kid brought it back and it was a mess. The petals were broken [it was tattered and worn; wilting]. And he lifts this rose up. And his big crescendo is to lift up that broken rose and say, ‘Now who would want this?’ [tattered and worn rose. Who would want something used, like this?] [Chandler says,] Anger welled up in me and I wanted to [stand up and] scream [at the top of my lungs] ‘Jesus wants the rose!’

That’s the whole point of the Christian story! We are *all* the rose, and we have a God who scans the horizon *waiting* for the tattered, broken, and used to come home. And He *always* welcomes us home! That’s what you learn from the younger son.

[The Older Son]

Now you guys are going to have listen way faster than what you are doing, okay? Here is the older son, Verse 25:

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field... [You’ve kind of forgotten about him at this point, haven’t you? You’re like, “ Oh, It’s such a rich, wonderful story. No wonder we stop preaching it usually at that point- let’s pray,” right? It’s what you feel like you should do, but “whoa, whoa, whoa,” says Jesus, “there’s another one. It’s the story of two sons.] ...The older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’”

It’s really important that you see this guy is in field, which is where he is supposed to be as a good boy, who works for his father, and is the son, the inheritor of the land. He’s doing all the work! He’s doing exactly what he *ought* to be doing. After a long day of work, he’s walking toward the house on, I



don't know, a Tuesday night and there is dancing and singing, which does not usually happen on Tuesday nights, usually, at the Jewish farmhouse. So, he's like, "What is going on? The whole town is in my house and they are all singing, and dancing, and celebrating, and stuff. Hey you! Come over here. What's going on?" "Oh, you haven't heard? Your brother, who left and was off... he's back. Your dad's killed the fattened calf and having a big party!" Now this boy, I'm sure that he'd heard about what his brother was doing... but the return of his beloved brother. What you expect to happen here is, "Alright! A party on a Tuesday! Right, awesome! Let's dance! Celebrate!" What you get of course, is verse 28,

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, [Now, you need to note the language here. This is the crux of the passage. Here's the boy's argument:] 'Look [Dad]! All these years I've been *slaving* for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. [Not the fattened calf, just a measly, tough, rotten, young goat!] But when this son of yours [Not my brother, this son of *yours*] who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the [the wedding calf, the] fattened calf [have the whole city, you kill that] for him!' [Really!? In what world is this just?] 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

So, what's his problem, this older boy, what is the crux of his problem? Here it is, as succinctly as I can put it. He is mad at his father for not playing by the rules. See, the rules are, if you are good boy and you do good things, you get good things. If you are a bad boy and you do bad things, you get bad things. What we've got here is a bad boy, who has done bad things, getting good things, and a good boy doing good things not getting those good things; injustice!

Let me try to summarize this whole passage this way, okay? Todd is leading worship here in the Worship Centre this morning. Todd is a good friend of mine, and we spend quite a bit of time together. Let's pretend, for a minute, that Todd has a million dollars—which he does not have, okay? He will never have a million dollars, this guy. There is not a chance that he gets a million dollars. [laughter] So Todd has a million dollars and I want the million dollars from Todd because, clearly, I am going to use the million better than he is. So, I have two options on how it is that I can get this million dollars from Todd: Option number one, I can punch him in the mouth and I can throw him to side which is, let's be honest, easy, right? [laughter] So, I can push him to the side, just grab that million dollars, and take off with it and spend it. Maybe I will go to a far off country. I can go to Regina and spend it all there! [laughter] I can use it for whatever I want to use it for, because I am smarter about these things than Todd is. Or, I can choose a different approach, and I could try and be nice to Todd in order to get the money. I could butter him up. I could do his car. I could let him lead worship at church. [laughter] I could go to his house and watch the Oilers play with him and pretend to be excited when they win. I could do all these things with the expectation, of course, that Todd is going to give me the money. Be good, so he gives me the good. Here's the thing, in either choice that I make, I don't really care about Todd. I care about what Todd's going to give me. Todd is just in the way.



Here's the thing, there are two different ways that you can be alienated from God. One of the ways you can be alienated from God is you can punch him in the mouth. Say, "I don't care about you, I clearly am going to use the things the things you have made in this world better than the rules that you have for them. I am just going to run off to a far off country and I'm going to use it however I want. Don't you dare think I'm ever going to step foot in one of your dumb churches. I'm going to live my way, justify my way, claim you're dead, and come up with all sorts of philosophies to say that I am *not* on your team. Don't care about you. Give me what is mine." It's irreligious alienation. Or, you can be alienated from God in a religious way. You can say, "I'm going to go to church every week, I'm going to give the money, I'm going to do all the right things, so that God will give me the things that I actually want: the blessings from Him. I don't really care, ultimately, about Him. He's not the treasure, the stuff He *has* is the treasure. I want it, and I'm going to use my good works to get it." You're still alienated from God, you are just religiously alienated.

So here is the real question that you have to ask, "What does it look like, or how do I know, if I am religiously alienated from God?" Well, you get mad at God when he breaks the rules. For example, when you don't get what you think you deserve, you do all the good things and you pray, and you pray, and you pray, and God doesn't answer the prayer the way that you want and you say, "Really? This is how you repay me? All of my life has been committed to you, and you won't give me the good stuff, the good life, the good answer that I want? Really? Not even a young goat?!" Or, you can get what you think you don't deserve, and you get mad at that. A bad circumstance comes into your life, sickness, financial challenge, whatever, you say, "Really God, this is how you repay me? Again, I have done everything the way you have asked me to and it's not yielding the results that I want. Good begets good. I've done good and you are giving me bad. Broke the rules!"

Tim Keller says it really well in his little book, *The Prodigal God*:

"Elder brothers expect their goodness to pay off and when it doesn't, there is confusion and rage. If you think goodness and decency is the way to merit a good life from God, you will be eaten up with anger, since life never goes as we wish. You will always feel that you are owed more than you are getting. You will always see someone doing better than you in some aspect of life and will ask, 'Why this person and not me? After all I've done!'"

Sound familiar? Look, the reason I say it sounds familiar, and let's be honest, this is the default setting of churchy people. Most of us are the not the irreligious alienated people from God. Many of us are the religious alienated people from God, who are angry with Him because He has broken the rules. In quiet moments, in the dark of night, we shake our fists and we are mad. Outside the house, not partying, just mad at Him. You know what's great about the end of this passage, is that the father comes out and he pleads with this boy— the language there is actually that he repeatedly pleads with him. In the Greek, it's an imperfect tense, meaning that he comes and says, "Come on, come on, just come on! There's a party and you like to dance. Just coming inside. Come on. Come inside. There is a bunch of sinners in there, you are one of them. Come on. Just come. Come on." The father doesn't have to do this, right? He doesn't have to run after this kid anymore than he had to run after the first kid. But, he comes out and he pleads with people like us to come into the party. The other things



that's interesting is how it ends. There is like no resolution here, is there? You're kind of like, "Okay, what does the kid do?" There is a reason for that. It is because Jesus wants to leave it with you. He want to say, "What will it be? What do you want to do here?" My churchy friends, what do you want to do? Either you can come and join the party of forgiven sinners, counting yourself as one, or, you can stay outside in the cold, angry at God for not recognizing what you think your obedience deserves. Which do you want to do? The party is way better, it's way better.

Let me pray for us. Lord, I love this text, Father. I love it because it has such meaning to me, Father, and because I see myself in both the younger son and older son and I can see myself needing this deep forgiveness from you. Your justice would demand judgment and yet you have, in your grace, shown me mercy over and over again. And, I also see myself in this older brother. Sometimes I getting mad because I think that the world should work where I do good things and you give me good things. When sickness or bad circumstances come into my life, I get mad. But, Father, I pray that you would remind me, and all of us, that the right direction to run is always toward the Father and His party. Would you receive us back, we repentant sinners, we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen."