

Striving and Security

Luke 15:11-32

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Will you pray with me?

Lord God, we pray that as we open your word that you would speak to us, that your Holy Spirit would be at work in our hearts, and that we would be different people that came in this morning. We want to be molded to look a little bit more like Jesus Christ, a little bit less like the sinner that we wrestle with every day. Thanks Lord that you're at work in us through your word and through your Spirit. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

In addition to a ridiculous somewhat challenging name, there are some other things you should know about me. I am the first born of three sons. I am the stereotypical responsible one. It's not that my younger two brothers are irresponsible. They're actually pretty decent guys. But I was the one that was responsible for watching the younger two when my parents were out. I was the one that had the new responsibilities first because I was the oldest. I was the first one to drive and the first one to stay at home for a weekend by himself because I was the oldest.

If you know anything about Myers-Briggs, I'm an ENFP. I'm an idealist. I'm entrepreneurial. But NF's are somewhat interesting. One description says, "What NF's are seeking at any given time is personal identity. The NF never feels as if they know themselves." So I'm this eldest who feels this responsibility to follow the rules and do things the right way, and now I'm this idealist who is always feeling like he doesn't quite know himself.

If enneagram is your preference, I'm a 2. And the website Your Enneagram Coach says that "The weakness of a type 2 is that they will confidently insert their helpful support in hopes that others will say how grateful they are to the type 2's thoughtful care." My whole deal is I want to serve you so that you'll pat me on the back. It's very selfless. I'm working on it. But what you see in who I am is that I'm a bundle of insecurity. I'm a bundle of constantly looking for someone else to kind of tell me where I stand and to make sure that I'm following the rules the right way all the time.

This morning, we're going to have the scriptures teach us about the security of the Christian by examining the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. This parable of Jesus is pretty well known. It's received a lot of extra attention in the last decade, decade and a half because of Tim Keller's book *The Prodigal God*.

In this parable, Jesus illustrates the extravagant grace of the Father through a story about a wayward younger son, a self-righteous older son, and the love of their father. I'll be reading the whole parable but zeroing in on the older brother. What I want you to hear through the scriptures this morning is that it is a relationship with God the Father through Jesus that brings real security to the Christian life.

Now, hear the word of God from Luke 15:11-32.

And he 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. 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 in 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 am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am 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. 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 have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this 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 your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord.

My goal here is to dig a little bit beyond the passage and try to examine the heart of the older son, the older brother, and the heart of the father. If you've done any reading on the older brother or if you've just been reading along here, it's very obvious for the older brother that his presenting sin is self-righteousness. He tells his father, look, these many years I've served you, and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. He's done all the work and gets none of the reward.

But what is it that's just below that self-righteousness? What is it that's making him like this? Why is the son so angry, so hurt, so indignant with his father? I would like to propose to you that the older brother is so upset because he's insecure. Somewhere, he has got it into his head that the way he receives the reward of his inheritance comes through the work that he does.

Maybe it's social expectation, right? All of the community knows that the older sons get their inheritance, and good older sons do all the things that their fathers tell them to do. It's kind of like the good little children who get dessert eat all their vegetables. You can't have the dessert unless you eat the veggies. Well, maybe you're not going to get two-thirds of the inheritance if you don't obey the father. Or maybe the father taught his son the right things to do, the right way to work, the right way to be a son, and the son took things a little bit farther and missed some of the point.

Whatever the reason that the older brother had, when his younger brother came home after squandering his father's estate, the father brings him in without hesitation. In fact, more than without hesitation. He brings him in with celebration. This blows up the older brother's expectations. All the things that he thought were true about how you receive inheritance is gone. It's destroyed. The older brother had worked and worked to be perfectly aligned to receive the reward that was before him. And now it all doesn't make sense.

How am I going to get my reward? How is this working? I'm uncomfortable.

G. Campbell Morgan is a theologian and pastor, and he comments on this passage, "Look at this elder son, and what do we find? He was devoted to his father's law, and he was devoted to his father's service, but he was entirely out of sympathy with his father's heart." He was totally out of sympathy with his father's heart, and as a result, he's insecure. The older son strives and strives with the rules, looking for them to lock in his inheritance. And then it doesn't.

In 1981, Dunkin Donuts released a commercial with Fred the baker. Maybe some of you remember. Fred is a heavysset guy, bald head, dark mustache. And the alarm clock rings, and it's one of those alarm clocks with the actual bells on the top kind of thing. And the alarm clock rings, and he's on his side, and the camera's facing him. He turns off the alarm clock, and the first thing he mutters is, "Time to make the donuts." And then he's shuffling through his house. You see him walk past the bathroom door, and he's mumbling, "Time to make the donuts." As he walks out the door to go to work, his wife hands him his lunch, and her hair is still in curlers. He says to her somewhat jealously, "I bet the guys who make supermarket donuts are still in bed." The guy's kind of miserable to be truthful.

Then you see Fred the baker making the donuts with fellow bakers, and he's kind of barking at them a little bit about how they make the donuts and the ingredients and that kind of thing. His hands are covered in flour. One of the other bakers starts to doze off, and Fred reaches over and just beyond gently slaps him in the face. Flour goes flying. He wakes up, and they go back to work.

And just as that scene is ending, the narrator comes on with a voiceover, and he says, "Of course, when you make donuts this good, there is one reward. They taste so great; people buy an awful lot of them." And as this line is ending, you see Fred the baker. The store looks exactly the same as they do now, right? He's looking at the racks of donuts, and he turns around. As he turns around, he sees all these people who are waving that they want donuts. He's got this grumpy face, and when he sees the people, this big smile comes on his face. He clasps his hands, and he says, "Good morning, folks." It's the only cheerful line that he has in the whole commercial.

You see, what gets Fred the baker out of bed in the morning isn't serving people, and it isn't making an excellent product. Nope. He does all these things. He gets up early. He uses these ingredients, and he does it in order to make money. This is his security. This is the place where he finds his confidence, where he finds his significance, where he finds his worth, kind of like me and people. That's where I struggle.

When we move past Jesus's time, past 1981 and Fred the baker, we find ourselves in the midst of a complex tangle of doing the right things to get the right outcomes here in 2020. It happens in our jobs. We tow the company line in order to get the promotion, forgetting in the process that we are to work as if working for God, not for people. It happens in our relationships. We bend over backward to do favors so that people will say something kind or be in our debt. And we are forgetting that we are to do nothing motivated by selfish ambition or conceit, but humbly consider others better than ourselves. It happens with our kids. We'll do anything to bend their behavior to our will instead of shaping their hearts to the will of God.

The list goes on and on. Maybe I didn't find you in these three, but somewhere, it is our human instinct, it is our sinful flesh and nature to look for something other than Jesus and the Father to give us significance and security. And as Morgan said, we find ourselves entirely out of sympathy with our Father's heart. We'll do all the work, but we're really not interested in the why. We just want the reward. I'll do the work to get the reward.

Let's talk about the heart of the father. The father's been nothing but gracious throughout the entire parable. He gave his younger son his inheritance which was kind of this way of saying, Dad, I wish you were dead. But he gave it to him anyway and then freely allowed him to leave. I'm sure it wasn't without a little parting fatherly advice, but kind and gentle and encouraging. And when he sees the

younger son show back up, he runs to him. He is so excited to have him home. It didn't matter that his son had wanted him dead. It didn't matter that his son had squandered all that the Father had. The Father just wants him home. He's taking off his robe and putting it on his son. He's taking off his ring and putting it on the younger brother. He's getting shoes, and he's throwing a party. He's not slipping him in the back door and saying, man, I'm really glad you're home, son, but let's see if we can manage this social disgrace that you've become. No. He's like, invite the town.

Now, noticing that his older son is not at the party, he goes out to him, too. He reaches out to him, too, and he invites him into the party. Now, think about the impact of this, the fact that the father leaves the party. It's embarrassing frankly because he has an older son who's disrespecting him, and he has to leave his guests. He has to stop doing the job of host to cajole his son to come in. But the father goes anyway, and he goes with a gentle and loving spirit. I think if I were the father, I'd be walking out the door saying, son, get in here. But that's not what he says.

The father attempts to redirect the thinking and behavior of the older son using one preposition, one word. And it's the word "with." In verse 31, the father responds to the son's accusations by saying, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." You see what the word "with" does? It moves the older son's security from obedience to relationship. It goes from being about following the rules to being about who you're connected to. When the father says, "All this is mine is yours," he's saying that because you are with me, because we are connected, because we are in relationship, you get it all. It's all for you. It always has been.

Son, thank you for supervising the plowing in the fields today. And I really appreciate your assistance with the barn that we built. Oh, and when did you get a chance to reorganize the pantry? It looks great. But you get what I have because I'm your dad. You get what I have because you're with me, not because you did those other things.

My wife Joy and I were discussing the text this week, and she said that the father's response might be that striving has kept the older brother from realizing that he is the father's. All this work has actually caused him to miss the connection. You can see the dad saying to the son, it has kept you from realizing your security. In all the business, you missed it, son.

You see, relationship is a much better avenue than obedience to receive security and reward because relationship is so much stronger. Truthfully, it's easy to slip up and disobey. We can do it intentionally. We can do it accidentally. We can do it just because we don't know what we're supposed to do. Relationship to a person like this father is very hard to break. He has clearly demonstrated that by the way he redeemed his lost son.

Jesus does something very clever here. Have you ever noticed that at the end of this parable, He leaves everybody hanging? Have you ever noticed that before? What does the older brother do? Does he go in? Does he dig his heels in and just get more stubborn? I'm not associating with that jerk of a younger brother. I'm not going in there. The father exhorts the older son to come into the party by saying, "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." And we just don't know what the older brother is going to do.

In a lot of ways, it feels like Jesus looks at us and says, what would you do? Put yourself in that place. What are you going to do?

And I can't help but think of John 14:6-7 where Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. And no one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on, you do know him, and you have seen him."

You see, the avenue to relationship with the Father is through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. The avenue to security for our lives is through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. It doesn't matter how many of you come to me and say, hey, that was a decent sermon. Thanks. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. My security needs to be found in the work of Christ for me, in my connection to the

Father. He is my way to get there. It doesn't matter how much money you make because your security is found in the work of Christ because He's the avenue to be connected to the Father.

Let's look at our hearts as we try to live sympathetically with the Father. All of the older son's striving was about the reward. We talked about that. And the father addresses the reward in his response. He says, you're with me, and so all I have is yours. And so there has to be some sort of reward for being connected to God the Father.

Actually, this is addressed in the Westminster Shorter Catechism in question number 36 which asks, "What are the benefits in this life that come with justification, adoption, and sanctification?" And adoption seems to be the right one for us right now of those three because we're talking about being adopted. We're talking about being connected with God the Father. And the answer tells us that the rewards are four, and any of these could be a sermon. Actually, this whole point could probably be several sermons. We're really just barely scratching the surface. The answer tells us that the rewards are "The assurance of God's love, the peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Spirit, and perseverance to the end."

I know you might be wondering isn't there a little bit of financial security in there for us? And the answer is no. God doesn't guarantee health, wealth, status, convenience, length of life, or a bunch of other things that we so desperately look for to make secure. Instead, He uses those things, health, wealth, convenience, and that sort of thing by giving them to us, or taking them away from us, or never giving them to us to remind us that He loves us. He uses these things to remind us that even though we sin, there is peace of conscience because Christ has paid for our sin. He reminds us that even in the hardest times, in the midst of a global pandemic, in the midst of a tumultuous country, there is joy in the Holy Spirit. And we are going to make it. There is perseverance to the end. These benefits are fashioned around being with the Father through Jesus, not so much centered on what we think we need in the moment.

Additionally, as we live sympathetically with the Father, our understanding of law changes. The older brother followed all the rules to get the reward. But what's the purpose of following the rules? Well, the rules have become an expression of love for the Father. Instead of having to do them, we get to do them. And the rules become a glimpse into the future of what our world will look like and how it will work.

Imagine for a second a world where there are no idols, where nothing comes before the one true God, and we aren't so easily distracted. Imagine a place where every life is valued as an image bearer of God and where lying doesn't exist, a place where you can actually believe the car salesman. Sorry, I don't mean to offend any car salesmen. But lying doesn't exist, and so what people say is actually true. This is the point of the rules now. They are an expression of love. They are a vision of the future. They are what we are hoping for, and it isn't a fairytale but an imminent future for those who are with the Father through Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, being with the Father through Jesus and knowing the security of that reward will begin to shape our hearts now. You will find that your need for those other securities will slowly dissipate, some of them faster than others. And you'll look for them less and less because the security of your Father is becoming more and more significant.

I also believe that the Father is going to give us opportunities to express our confidence in His security, meaning that there are rules to follow, and there is still stuff to do, right? But there's also this opportunity to step out in faith. And He's going to provide those opportunities to step out. And I would encourage you that most likely those opportunities are going to come when you find the most security not related to the Father. If you find that you find security in money, that might be the opportunity to give. If you find security from people, that might be the opportunity to do something selfless for somebody that's hard to interact with or that doesn't give you the response that you want.

Do you see where I'm going with this? We've got to step out in confidence in faith knowing that it's being with the Father where we find our security. It is being with the Father where we find our reward.

Brothers and sisters, Christian, God is at work. He is connected with us through Christ, and He wants to secure our hearts and our lives. Let's pray.

Lord God, we are filled with insecurity. We struggle to be confident in our relationship with you, with others, with life. And you say that it is because of our relationship with you that we are secure. Help us to believe that. Help us to obey as an expression of love and not as an expression of obligation. Help us to obey as an expression of seeing the world that you are making, not as just to get the reward. Lord, make our hearts alive so that we can live sympathetically with you. We are grateful for the work of Christ, His life and death and resurrection. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.