

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*We Don't Serve the Lord with Gladness When...*"

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and we find ourselves beginning a new section of the parable of the prodigal son. Please stand with me for the reading of God's Word. We will start at **verse 24...**

Luke 15:24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. **25** "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** 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.' **28** But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, **29** 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.

Before we dig into these verses I want to put you in the place of the religious leaders. Listen to this verse...

Matthew 21:45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard [Jesus's] parables, **THEY PERCEIVED THAT HE WAS SPEAKING ABOUT THEM.**

The religious leaders got used to Jesus's teaching' making them look bad.

As Jesus preached the parables in Luke 15 they had to know He was going to say something about them, because they were the reason he was preaching these parables in the first place. Briefly look back at verse one...

Luke 15:1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

But surprisingly, it seemed like He wasn't going to say anything about them, which they must have thought was wonderful:

- They listened to the first parable and the shepherd finds his lost sheep and then rejoices. Nothing bad about them.
- They listened to the second parable about the woman finding the lost coin and then rejoicing. Again, nothing bad about them.
- They listened to the third parable and the father finds the lost son and then rejoices. Again, nothing bad about them.

And considering that each of the previous parables ended when whatever was lost was found and then there was rejoicing, when the father found his lost son and then rejoiced, they must've thought, "*This is great. Jesus just preached three parables and none of them made us look bad.*"

But He had a surprise for them. The third parable wasn't going to end like the previous two. Jesus has someone else to introduce: the older brother. And he is going to make the religious leaders look VERY bad.

He represents them in prominent ways as we will see:

1. The older brother's attitude toward his repentant younger brother represents the religious leaders' attitude toward repentant sinners
2. The older brother's attitude toward serving his father represents the religious leaders' attitude toward serving the Lord
3. The older brother's self-righteousness represents religious leaders' self-righteousness

One more thing before we begin...

Up to this point, maybe you haven't been able to identify with the prodigal son, because you haven't been a prodigal. For the most part:

- You have worked hard
- You have been obedient
- You have stayed close to your Heavenly Father

Then this sermon might have the most application for you, because perhaps you can identify with the older brother.

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With that in mind, let's start at **verse 24** for context...

Luke 15:24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

Remember when I told you how much I appreciate the imagery God can create with so few words?

The son was **in the field** and what does this make you think?

- He's working
- He's responsible
- He's faithfully serving his father

So it presents quite the contrast...

His younger brother is off living disobediently in Gentile territory, and he's living obediently at home.

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The celebration was loud enough that the older brother heard the music and dancing as he approached the house. He wants to know what's going on...

Luke 15:26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 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.'

I like the words **received him back safe and sound**.

Isn't this a beautiful way to describe where the son is?

- He's **safe** in the protection of his father's household
- He's **sound** in terms of both spiritual and emotional health.

The same can spiritually be said of us when God the Father receives us.

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The older son learns the wonderful news...

"Your brother has returned. Your father has received him back into the family. Now we're having a party in his honor."

But instead of rejoicing, we read...

Luke 15:28a But he was angry and refused to go in.

This is much worse than it looks. Refusing to go in would have brought public disgrace to the father.

The son's anger mirrors the grumbling of the religious leaders: they were upset at repentant sinners being forgiven...just like the older brother was upset about his repentant younger brother being forgiven.

The ugliness of the older brother's heart is revealed in two ways, and this is the first way: his attitude toward his brother's repentance...

The older brother was filled with righteous indignation. If you write in your Bible, you can circle these words, draw a line up to **verse 2** and circle the word **grumbling**.

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When we consider that the father wanted to celebrate the son's repentance, but the older brother was angered by it, it reveals just how far the older brother's heart was from his father's.

It is important to recognize there are two rebellious sons in this parable who were both far from their father. When you look at them physically, the older brother might have been living under his father's roof, and the younger brother might have been living miles away, but their hearts were equally far from their father.

One commentator put it like this...

“In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, you have a son who's running away from his father in his disobedience, and another son who's running away from his father in his obedience. The latter is a Pharisee.”

The older brother had left his father without ever leaving the farm.

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Consider this irony...

The older brother looked down on his younger brother, but after the younger son repented, he was close to his father, and the older son was far from his father.

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But look what the father does...

Luke 15:28b His father came out and entreated him,

The father could have come out and rebuked the older brother for his ugly attitude and rebelliousness in refusing to join the party, but it says he **entreated him**. Most translations say he pleaded with him.

When we read this parable, we tend to think about the father's grace and patience toward the younger brother, but he was equally gracious and patient toward the older brother.

Think about what it took for the father to minister to the older brother:

- He had to leave the celebration
- He had to leave the other guests
- And he had to leave the younger brother

At the beginning of the parable, we talked about the father letting the younger brother go when he wanted to leave home. The father didn't chase him down.

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But he responds differently to the older brother. He goes out after him.

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The younger son got lots of attention earlier, but now the older son needs lots of attention.

And it pictures two things...

It pictures Jesus's patience – much of the time – with the religious leaders. They refused to celebrate sinners' repentance just like the brother refused to celebrate his younger brother's repentance, but Jesus was patient with them...much of the time

And it pictures how God the Father knows how to deal with each of us:¹

- He knows how to deal with us if we're prodigals like the younger brother – he wants us to return home
- He knows how to deal with us if we're self-righteous like the older brother – he wants us to join the celebration

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Now it was one thing for the older brother to be upset earlier, but after the father made such a wonderful appeal about his younger brother coming home safe and sound and how it was right to kill the fattened calf, we would expect the older brother to respond differently now and say something like...

“You're right. That makes sense. I'm sorry. We should celebrate his return. This is all very reasonable. Let's go back inside.”

Let's see if that's what he says...

Luke 15:29 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.

The father's kind plea to his older son fell on deaf ears. It is almost shocking that he responded this way.

The older son looks much worse now because he ignored his father's gracious words. This shows how ugly his heart was, which is really to say how ugly the religious leaders' hearts were since he pictures them.

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Listen to this verse...

Psalm 100:2 Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!

This verse doesn't just tell us to serve the Lord, it tells us HOW to serve the Lord: **with gladness**. And it is evident the older son was not **serving the Lord with gladness**.

Perhaps we don't always serve the Lord with gladness, so we can learn from him...and this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson One: The way we serve is as important as serving.

Briefly take your mind to the Sermon on the Mount. As you probably know, Jesus condemns outward activities – such as giving, praying, and fasting – when they are done wrong inwardly, or with the wrong heart.

Serving can be added to this list of outward activities that must be done with the right heart.

Briefly turn a few chapters to the left to **Luke 10**.

Verses 25 through 37 contain the parable of the good Samaritan, which is one of the most convicting accounts in Scripture regarding serving.

Right after that, in verses 38 through 42, is the account of Mary and Martha, which reveals we must serve the Lord with the right attitude. Briefly look at **verse 40**...

Luke 10:40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”

You know you're not serving the Lord with gladness when you:

- interrupt His teaching
- criticize Him for being uncaring
- then give Him in order: "Tell my sister to help me!"

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Now turn back to **Luke 15**.

The older brother's attitude was probably even worse than Martha's.

I told you earlier the ugliness of the older brother's heart is shown in two ways:

1. First, the way he felt about his younger brother's repentance.
2. The second way is shown in the way he viewed serving his father.

Unlike his younger brother, the older brother brought no disgrace to his father. Outwardly he looked good and blameless because of his obedience and service, but inwardly he looked ugly because of his heart's condition.

This also makes him look like the religious leaders who didn't bring any disgrace to God the Father. They looked good and blameless outwardly because of their obedience and service, but they looked ugly inwardly because of their hearts' condition...

Matthew 23:25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The older brother's sins were of the heart rather than outward rebellion, but they were as deadly and as ugly as any of his younger brother's sins. Spiritually speaking, the older brother's garments were as filthy as his brothers.

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The older son was as ugly as his younger brother. His inward sins are no less sinful than his younger brother's outward sins.

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The ugliness of the son's heart is shown in the way he talked to his father. Notice he didn't call him father. Instead, he says...

Look

You can tell how angry he was. This was rude and disrespectful. He shows contempt for his father who had been so kind to him throughout his life and was being kind to him at this moment by leaving the party to come out to see him.

Why was he angry?

He said...

these many years I have served you,

The Greek word for **served** is *douleuō* (pronounced dool-oo-oh) related to the word *doulos*, which literally means slave.

He was angry because he viewed himself as a slave. He said, "*I have been your slave all these years.*"

Sadly, this is how he felt about serving his father.

Because the father is a picture of God the Father, we should look at the way the older brother serves his father and examine the way we serve our Heavenly Father.

And this brings us to lesson two...

Lesson Two: We don't serve the lord with gladness when we feel (Part One) like slaves.

The older brother had been feeling like a slave and he had kept it to himself. But when all of this happened with his younger brother it was too much. It pushed him over the edge. He finally revealed how he had been feeling about serving all this time. It's like he vomited out all this ugliness that had been in his heart.

I think this would be a very difficult thing for any father to hear. It would be like one of your children coming to you and telling you that they have served and obeyed very reluctantly.

The older brother didn't serve his father with gladness. He served him out of obligation.

And God doesn't want us serving out of obligation. He wants us serving with thankful hearts that are moved to do so as acts of worship.

Let's remember that the older brother serves as a rebuke to the religious leaders. Their religion was one of works by which they believed they could earn their own righteousness.

But the problem is that in a religion like this, God is not a loving Heavenly Father who gave His Son for your sins. Instead, He's a taskmaster:

- You are not His son or daughter. You are His slave.
- There is no joy or gladness. There is only anger and frustration.

Slaves never enjoy themselves and if we see ourselves as slaves in our service to the Lord then we are not going to serve with gladness.

So let me ask you the same question I ask myself:

- When I serve the Lord, do I do so with gladness, or do I feel like a slave?
- Do I serve the Lord with joy, or do I picture myself like one of the Hebrews back in Egypt serving Pharaoh?

Next, look at the words...

and I never disobeyed your command

You can hear the pride, and this brings us to the next part of lesson two...

Lesson Two: We don't serve the lord with gladness when we feel (Part Two) proud.

The older brother is the good son who has always done what he was supposed to do:

- He always worked hard
- He never asked for an inheritance
- He never took off
- He never lived immorally

So, he thought the way the younger son was being rewarded was an insult to his own faithfulness and obedience.

Speaking of his obedience, he said **I never disobeyed your command.**

This couldn't be true. It reminds me of the rich young ruler who also said he kept all God's commands.

But it's possible that he thought it was true, because that's one of the problems with pride: it blinds us. It causes us to think things about ourselves that aren't true...such as we think we have been more obedient and righteous than we actually have.

And let me get you to contrast the two brothers again:

- The younger brother's humility in saying: "**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.**"
- The older brother's pride in saying, "**I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me....**"

So, another irony...

The older brother thinks he's much better than his younger brother, but after the younger brother's repentance, his humility makes him much better than his proud older brother.

Again, the older brother resembles the religious leaders who were filled with pride about how obedient they had been and how much they had done for God.

Let's consider whether he resembles us too:

- When I serve the Lord, do I do so filled with gladness or filled with pride?
- Do I serve the Lord with joy, or am I like the religious leaders thinking, "*Look at all I'm doing and how good I am! God, I thank you that I am not like other men. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*"

Now let's see one of the results of pride. Look at the words...

yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.

He thought his life was miserable. It was all about what he didn't get to do. This caused him to feel sorry for himself and the same thing can happen with us...and this brings us to the last part of lesson two...

Lesson Two: We don't serve the lord with gladness when we feel (Part Three) sorry for ourselves.

Pride can't help but produce ungratefulness and self-pity.

Henry Morris said, "*The proud and the self-righteous always feel that they are not treated as well as they deserve.*"

The words **you never gave me** reveal how discontent and bitter the son has been all this time.

We have been talking about how ugly the son's heart has been, but until now we couldn't really tell why he served his father. Now we see it was about getting something in return.

The older brother thought his younger brother didn't deserve everything he got, but the older brother definitely thought he deserve more than he received:

- The younger brother is not worthy, but he is worthy.
- His younger brother got the fattened calf, but he didn't even get a measly **young goat**:

- The younger brother got the big celebration with the whole village, but he didn't even get to have a small celebration with just his friends.

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So here's what's interesting...

The older brother wasn't the same as his younger brother outwardly...but he was the same as him inwardly in that he wanted the same things as him:

- The older brother also wanted to enjoy material goods from his father without his father's company...just like the younger brother.
- The older brother also wanted a celebration, just like his younger brother.

They were not so different at all, at least not inwardly. They were the same. They wanted the same things.

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Remember Martha?

She said to Jesus, "*Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?*"

- She thought she was being neglected and overlooked, so she felt sorry for herself...just like the older brother.
- She thought nobody cared about her and all that she was doing...just like the older brother.

And maybe just like us?

So again, let me ask you the same question I ask myself:

- When I serve the Lord, do I do so filled with gladness or filled with self-pity?
- Do I serve the Lord with joy, or am I like Martha thinking, "*I'm the only one working. I must do everything myself. Nobody cares about me. I never get anything for all I do*"

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Now the obvious question is...

How can we serve the Lord with gladness instead of whatever lesser feeling we've been experiencing?

This brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Three: Serve the lord with gladness by thinking about how He served you.

If we struggle serving the Lord with gladness, let me provide two encouragements that I give myself...

First, confess your struggle and pray that God helps you grow in this area. Ask Him to replace your feeling of slavery, pride, or self-pity with gladness and joy.

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Second, reflect on how the Lord has served you...

Matthew 20:28 [Jesus said,] "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus served us in a way we can only imagine: He was willing to give his life for us.

When we consider how Jesus served us, how can we not be motivated to serve Him with gladness?

Focusing on Christ's radical act of serving can move us to serve with joy.

And being moved to serve Christ in response to what He did for us allows us to serve with hearts of worship versus serving out of obligation. Instead of being proud of what we've done for the Lord, we will be humbled and thankful for what the Lord has done for us.

If you have any questions about anything I've shared this morning, I will be up for after service and out consider it a privilege to build a speak with you.

Also, as a reminder, for people involved with communion and for young men who would like to be involved with Scripture reading, we will have a brief meeting after the service in the sanctuary, so please join us.

Let's pray.

ⁱ And it pictures God the father's grace and patience as he goes out to plead with people who refused to come in to the kingdom of God.