

The prodigal's brother

Part 1

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[00:00:01] Good afternoon. I must confess to you that it surprises me that we should have the 15th of Luke, any part of it before us this afternoon, but so be it, because the words that I have particularly in mind are these words, and he was angry and would not go in.

One finds that having once friends so much amongst younger people, there's a tendency for them to get uptight about one thing in Christian teaching.

And that's the question of God's favour being shown towards one person, and his disfavour [00:01:07] being shown towards another one.

I'm sure to many of us, this is a matter which we understand, which we've come to accept, which we've learnt from God.

But in my experience, it's hard.

I remember sitting in the little back hall at Potter's Bar with our late brother, Mr. Percy Bull, and arguing with him, and struggling with him against the truth of predestination, and insisting to him that there must be the activity of man's choice in deciding whether to become a Christian or not. [00:02:02] And I'll never forget what he said to me. He said these words, there's nothing but divine grace between my soul and the eternal burnings.

And you know those words, they made such an impression upon me, that I accepted from our brother the truth of the divine prerogative of predestination, of election, of sovereign choice.

And now, when a friend of mine met me that I hadn't seen for thirty years, and he asked me the question, are you a Calvinist or a Newtonian? I said, I have no idea.

But he said, well, do you believe in human choice, or do you believe in predestination? [00:03:02] I said, well, I believe in predestination. Well, he said, then you're a Calvinist. I don't think I am really, you know, but nonetheless, I believe in predestination. But to many of my young friends, I find it's a very unpalatable doctrine, and I can only think that this is why the Lord has led us this afternoon into this passage of the fifteenth of Luke.

Now, it would be quite wrong for me, as your invited speaker for this afternoon, to stand up here and not to talk about the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course it would. But we have to remember, first of all, that

the words that we've read together are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here was he, in his ministry, as the Son of Man, who had come to seek and to save that [00:04:04] which was lost.

This is his character in Luke's Gospel. And I can see a dear brother over there, he's smiling. And so he should be smiling. Isn't it marvellous? The message of the Son of Man who's come to seek and to save that which was lost. This is what we preach every Sunday evening, don't we? This is what's the subject of our Gospel preaching. The Son of Man come to seek and to save that which was lost. And these parables that we have in the Gospel of Luke surely constitute the core of his message to mankind when he was here.

What precious stories he told. How simple they are. How familiar the background of the incidents that he put forward to the people of his day.

[00:05:01] And here in this particular one, it's so familiar to you and me that I can remember not long ago a young brother coming to our meeting, and because of the fact that I have two sons and one of them was just about to leave home, he preached on this scripture, this 15th of Luke, the certain man that had two sons and the younger one that went away. You know, I thought that was very nice. I thought that he really was being topical in his preaching. I was glad of it. And you know, I don't think we can go far wrong as young preachers if we preach from the parables that the Lord Jesus Christ told.

And as we think about this 15th of Luke which is so familiar to all of us, we all know, perhaps not the tiniest ones, but all those who have any maturity in the Christian pathway, we all know that in these parables the Lord Jesus was showing us the involvement of the [00:06:01] three persons of the Godhead in the work which he was doing as son of man. We know that in the parable of the good shepherd, he was speaking of himself as the one who had come to seek that which was lost.

And in the parable of the woman with the piece of silver, he was speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was working in the world when he was here, of course. Remember that his baptism, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven like a dove and it abode upon him.

And we read that he went forth in the power of the Spirit into the wilderness and afterwards we read that he went forth in the power of the Spirit to perform his ministry. So the Holy Spirit was working as well as the Lord Jesus Christ. And here in this parable that we've read together this afternoon, isn't he setting forth the [00:07:01] Father, the Father's heart, the Father's grace, the Father's compassion, the Father's immense love, the Father's whole character and who knew it like he did.

John tells us as he commences his gospel, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of an only begotten with a Father, full of grace and truth.

And I'm quite sure there was nobody else fitted as he was to tell us of the Father and how beautifully he did it. He told them about the Father in every part of his ministry, whether it be at the part that we think of as the Sermon on the Mount, where he talked about the Father who was good and the Father who was generous and kind, the Father that they failed to recognise, [00:08:04] the Father who was providential in his care, or whether we go to the other end of his ministry and we read about his words to the disciples where they said to him, Lord show us the Father and it sufficeth us. And he

could say to them, have you been so long time with me and have you not known the Father?

He that hath seen me hath seen the Father also.

Wonderful words. And here in this story he sets out the Father's love.

And how many times have we traced the pathway of the prodigal son from the pig troughs in the far country back to that place where the Father saw him and had compassion on him and [00:09:01] ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

And in those few words we have the Father's attitude to the sinner. We have the Father's readiness to receive the repentant one who comes back into his presence.

We have the glorious picture in human terms of the attitude of God towards the man in this world who has known what it is to go downhill and downhill until in the end he has come to the end of human resources and would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat but no man gave to him.

And so he experienced the meanness of the world. He experienced the poverty of the far country. He experienced the end of human resources. [00:10:02] And although he left home with half of his father's wealth, at that point he had nothing at all.

Nothing at all.

And it wasn't difficult for him then, was it, to say, I will arise and go to my father.

I will remember coming back to Potter's Bar again, the vicar, he was a very Oxbridge type of vicar, and his church was next door to the meeting hall. He's gone there, but his church, I believe, is still there and so is the meeting hall. And when we were working away and laying the car park in the front of the hall, we used to come by and stop and have a friendly chat, a little bit superior perhaps, but nonetheless friendly.

And I remember well the words that he said to us one day. He said, you know, I used to work down in the Isle of Dogs. [00:11:03] I think it was the Isle of Dogs, but it might have been Limehouse, but anyway, it was somewhere down in that part of London.

And he said, you know, the people down there, they say to me, you know, vicar, we don't need to come to church anymore because now we haven't got the same needs that we used to have.

And he went on to explain how that their whole attitude to life was changed because of the welfare state and because of trade union activity and because of the fact that there was no longer poverty among the working population of this country. Why today, even those that are out of work don't really know what it is to be hard up. I know there are some people who do, but they're the exception rather than the general rule. But the vicar was talking to us about the time when people didn't know what it was to be hard up.

But now he says, they say to me, we don't need to come to church anymore. We don't need church. We're all right now, you see.

[00:12:04] That's how it is.

We have to come to the end of our resources in one way or another as human beings. Either we have to come to that point where we have nothing and we're desperate and we cry to God or else we have to come to that point morally where we've gone so downhill that we realize that we're a lost sinner before him.

And you know, I believe that some people make a great mistake in preaching the gospel when they do a sales line about the Lord Jesus Christ and they say how attractive and beautiful he is and they say, you should recognize how marvelous the Lord Jesus is and you should take him for yourself, almost like somebody selling a motor car. It's not the way, not the way at all. The Lord Jesus is everything good that we can possibly say about him and we must hold [00:13:01] him up in all his glory and in all his beauty, but the only way that the poor sinner can come to the Lord Jesus Christ is on his knees.

And this is really the way. The prodigal came back to the father. He came back and he said, I've sinned against heaven and before thee. I'm no more worthy to be called thy son.

And so he took the humble place and what it cost him to take that place before his father when we think of the high-handed way he'd gone out saying, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.

Why? That was a sacrifice. He was right down in the dust, in effect, before his father's face.

But I don't really want to talk about him this afternoon because we're not primarily [00:14:01] here to preach the gospel, are we? I feel I've got to talk to you about the other man, the elder brother, the one who was angry and would not go in.

And have you ever thought of what a dreadful grief it was to the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ that the people in his day were like that?

And this man represents the people that the Lord Jesus came up against. He represents the people in the world today. He represents those who feel that they can't accept divine grace and don't really want to know about it.

As we open the epistle to the Romans, we get a description in the early part of it about mankind in general sort of terms.

It goes like this.

[00:15:05] Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity, whisperers, morally wicked things, but now listen to these things, back biters, haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful.

We have a panorama of human character.

Some may talk to us about the ascent of man. You don't find it in the word of God. You find the cover

lifted off, the heart of man, and you can see how thoroughly corrupt [00:16:08] it really is.

And I say again, what a grief to our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, to find the character, the hardness of the heart of the men of his day who were portrayed in this story in the elder brother who was angry and would not go in.

Now I want to talk to you a little bit more about him this afternoon. In fact, I want to think about him in a little depth, if you'll bear with me. As we read about him, the first thing we find about him is that he was suspicious.

Notice that. He was suspicious. [00:17:01] He came back from the field where he'd been working, he heard music and dancing.

He didn't agree with that, did he?

That wasn't right in his father's house, whatever was there to be frivolous about. So instead of going in and saying, where's the party, where can we join in, like some people would have done, he calls a servant in a corner, he says, what's going on?

You see, there's mistrust of the father.

He hasn't got any confidence in the father.

He's not prepared to give the father credit for doing what's right and being upright and straightforward and true in all his dealings.

[00:18:07] How terrible when we haven't got confidence in God. How terrible when we're suspicious of what God's doing. We look around in the world and we see happenings. And human reaction is to say, why doesn't God? And people don't trust God, they're suspicious of God. But I wonder whether all Christians trust God, whether there is not in some Christians just a grain of suspicion about whether God, and I wish to speak reverently, about whether God knows his business.

And we see what's happening. We see what's happening perhaps in Christendom today. We see perhaps the trends in the church today. And we wonder whether God really is doing the right thing, some of us, don't we? I don't want to go into detail. [00:19:02] I'll leave it as a broad question in your mind. He was suspicious because he heard music and dancing.

And I'm reminded of the servant in the parable of the talents who said, I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown and gathering where thou hast not strawed.

A man who didn't give God the credit for his integrity.

Well, now, the second thing we find about this man that the Lord spoke about, that was angry and would not go in, is that he was obstinate.

Goes right through, doesn't it? Obstinate, dreadfully obstinate.

Just like Cain.

Have you ever thought of God's grace when he reasoned with Cain?

[00:20:07] Cain who'd slain his brother, if thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted.

But if thou doest not well, then sin lieth at the door.

What was Cain's reaction? My punishments greater than I can bear, he says. And he goes out from the presence of the Lord and dwells in the land of Nod. He's obstinate to the point where he won't bend to the word of God. He won't come into line with God's thoughts. He won't bow to God's will. His heart is hard.

He's obstinate.

And also, he's angry, like Jonah.

[00:21:02] I find, as I come to search my Bible, that I can only find one man in the Bible, historically, who's said to be angry with God, and that was Jonah. And it says about Jonah that he was angry with God three times. He was very angry. And why was he angry? Well, he was angry because he didn't agree with divine grace. And he was angry because he was motivated by self-interest.

And this man was angry. He was angry because the father had had compassion upon his brother.

He was angry.

How dare he do anything for that?

And then we can understand, can't we, the words that would come into his mind about his brother, having regard to his assessment of the young chap that had gone to the bed.

[00:22:07] And then he was insolent because, you see, his father, who had shown such wonderful compassion to the prodigal, had come out to this angry and obstinate and suspicious man and entreated him. Entreated him.

Insolent in the way he answered his father back.

Paul writes to the Romans and he says, who art thou, O man, that answerest against God?

God has said, as we read in the ninth of Romans, Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated.

[00:23:05] And the question is asked in that chapter, what shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?

God forbid. And then it goes on to talk about the lump of clay, saying to the potter, why did you make me like that?

What do you think you're doing, making me like that? Imagine it.

You and I, brother and sister, we're the lumps of clay. We're made out of the dust of the earth. And

God is the divine potter, the one who has fashioned us. Everything that we are, everything about us is the work of his hands. Dare we to question him?

Dare we to be insolent to him? Dare we to answer him back in any respect? [00:24:01] Dare we to question his sovereign right, if he says in his wisdom, Jacob, I've loved, but Esau, I've hated.

And you know, I've heard it said that we can understand God hating Esau.

It's not really surprising when you come to think of it, because Esau was such a hasty and superficial kind of man, that for one meal, he sold his birthright. He dispensed with that which Abraham had toiled over for years and years and years, until he was a hundred years old, before he realised the blessing which God had for him in the person of Isaac.

God's promises, God's blessings sustained him all his life, but Esau threw it overboard [00:25:02] for one dish of lentils.

God says, I've hated Esau, and it's not surprising, is it, that God should hate Esau.

But what surprises me is that God loved Jacob.

Never was there in Jacob for God to love.

Jacob was a supplanter. Jacob was a cheat.

Jacob is called, in the prophet Isaiah, thou worm, Jacob. Not surprising, because that's the kind of man he was. He was a low man.

He was a man whose principles, you and I today, we would despise them. And yet God says, I love Jacob.

And so we can say that God's sovereign choice is something beyond our understanding, and how dare we question it.

[00:26:09] And here this man is insolent in the way he answers his father.

And he takes up a self-righteous attitude, and he says, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment. Ah, we can hear the man praying in the temple, can't we? Oh God, I thank thee that I'm not as other men are. I fast twice in the week. I pay tithes of all that I possess, not like this publican.

Grateful thing, isn't it?

However upright you and I may be as Christians, brother, don't let's ever get self-righteous.

Don't let's ever get to that point where we look at our brother in the Lord's presence, [00:27:06] and we despise him in our hearts. However far he may have gone, however far we may feel that he's failed of God's grace, then let us realise that we're one with him, that we're members of the body with him, and that he needs us to pray for him and to put out our hand to help him and to recover him and to

raise him up, to correct him perhaps, but to correct him in love and in grace.

May we always have this remembrance, a Syrian ready to perish was my father.

What have we got, any one of us that we might boast about, but divine grace, divine love, which has been shown to us.

[00:28:02] And then you see, as well as self-righteous, we see that he was jealous. He says, there's this young man, he's come back from this place where he's been, he wasted your substance with riotous living, he's devoured your living with harlots, and what have you done? You've given that fatted calf and you've killed it for him, and you never gave me a kid. You see, there's jealousy, there's deep jealousy that God hasn't been fair, that God's been kind to his brother, and he hasn't been fair to him.

Oh the terrible thing that jealousy is. What a dreadful thing it is, what damage it does. A young man came to the Lord Jesus, you remember, and he says, ask my brother to divide the inheritance with me, Lord. And the Lord says, not what he's come for, he says, you follow me.

[00:29:06] Jealousy is a terribly destructive thing, and if there's jealousy in the lives of you and me as Christians, brother and sister, how dreadful, and how much it will take away the spiritual power that ought to be in our lives. Here's this young man, thou never gavest me a kid.

And so you see, he's unappreciative, although he's been with the Father all these years, he's totally unappreciative of the Father's heart. He doesn't realise that the Father's ready to say to him, son, thou art ever with me and all that I have is thine. The Father doesn't want anything for himself, he's given one half of his fortune to one boy, and what's left all belongs to the elder brother, all that I have is thine. But he says, thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends. And so you see, he's isolated, he's isolated in his ideas, in his associations, he leaves [00:30:09] out his father, and he leaves out his brother, and he's only interested in myself and my friends.

I want a kid so that I can make merry with my friends, I don't want to make merry with you, and I don't want to make merry with that young man, you see.

If only you and I could have an understanding of the thought of merriment in the Father's heart, in which the angels are joined, and in which he wishes to join all the redeemed company.

He wants us to be in sympathy, in harmony with his heart, in which there's rejoicing over sinners coming in repentance.

You know, it's levelled against you and me that we're not sufficiently evangelical. [00:31:05] We haven't got the outreach that we ought to have, and alas, that it's true. But oh, that we might be in sympathy with the Father's heart, in rejoicing in sympathy with the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, and with the heart of the Holy Spirit, in rejoicing in sympathy with the holy angels, rejoicing joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance.

And so we see this poor man, he's isolated, he shuts himself away in his own corner with his own friends, and he says, I don't want to get involved with what the Father is doing now, today, in this house.

And then finally, he's unresponsive to the Father's entreaty.

And I'm reminded of the words that the Lord Jesus said to the scribes and the Pharisees, [00:32:06] and he said to them, you know what you're like? He said, you're like children playing in the marketplaces. And one half of them says to the other, you won't play with me. He says, we've piped unto you, played weddings, you haven't danced, we've mourned unto you, we've played funerals, you haven't lamented.

The Lord Jesus was so deeply touched, so deeply moved, so distressed by the fact that the people of his day were unresponsive.

You know, I believe that the Lord Jesus had tremendous delight in healing. He had tremendous joy in raising up those that were fallen, in cleansing the leper, [00:33:01] in giving sight to the blind. He entered into their experience as they found this wonderful freedom that came from his touch or from his word.

And when Lazarus came out from the tomb, bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and he realized there the power of his word over death, he saw it before his eyes. What delight it must have given to the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. But so far as the people of his day, I have piped unto you, and you have not danced. I've mourned unto you, and you have not lamented. O to be unresponsive to the word, to the works of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the grace of God.

And so you see, it seems to me that this man, by his attitude, he put himself beyond grace.

[00:34:03] Beyond grace. Although the father could come to him and say that word, child, literally it's child not son, child, child thou art ever with me.

There's tenderness in that word. There was tenderness for this brother as well as for the other brother. Child thou art always with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meat that we should be merry and glad.

For this thy brother was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

And for those who are incapable of rejoicing over such an event, then I believe that they put themselves, they put themselves beyond the reach of divine grace.

And you know, coming back to the point where I started talking this afternoon, those who [00:35:06] find fault with predestination, those who take up the words which are sometimes attributed rightly or wrongly to Calvin, they say, you can either be predestinated to be saved or yet they say you can be predestinated to be lost, but you don't read it in the Bible. The Bible doesn't say it.

It says that whom he did foreknow, them he did predestinate.

It talks about elect, being elect according to the foreknowledge of God. But those that find themselves in the place of the elder brother, they put themselves in that position because they are angry and they will not, and they will not go in.

[00:36:02] And I believe that it comes back to the exercise of the human will. My father used to teach me, and I thank him for it, he used to teach me that as long as the human will is in operation, a man will never come to Christ.

The exercise of the human will is always against God.

And so if we come to the Newtonian idea of saying whether or not we'll become a Christian is a matter of human choice, then I can say honestly and with conviction before you this afternoon, I don't believe it's possible for a man to choose to become a Christian because the human will, while it's exercised freely, will always lead a man away from God. When the Lord Jesus Christ was here on earth, what did he say? [00:37:04] He said to the people, ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

And then he told the story of those people that were invited to the wedding.

And they would not come, he says.

And then he looked across the valley over Jerusalem, and he wept over it, and he said, how often would I have gathered your children together like a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not.

And that's the way it is. That's the way the human will takes him. A man's will takes him away. It stands in opposition to the will of God. And I believe that unless God takes my will and breaks it, either by convicting me of [00:38:02] my sin by the Spirit's power and through the Word, or bringing me so low down in my experience that I cry to him for mercy, then I believe that my will will always keep me away from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I would, but ye would not.

And he was angry and would not.

Thank God that his mercy has reached me, as I believe it's reached most of you, if not all of you here this afternoon. And you've come to that wonderful experience that the prodigal was in, where he came back, he came to himself in the far country, realising that he'd got nothing and that he could do nothing about it, and that he was going to perish. And he said, my father's good, my father's rich, my father's generous, my father's kind, [00:39:08] my father's full of love. He said, I will arise and go to my father and I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned.

May God bless his word to every one of our hearts.