

Hearing God's Heartbeat He Loves Our Uptight Brother

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This morning we conclude our series of messages entitled Hearing's God Heartbeat. I've used as a resource for these messages a book by Tim Keller entitled The Prodigal God.

During this series I've asked you to pray for four persons who need to know and experience God's love. We are praying that God will provide opportunity for us to share his love with this person, invite them to church or to attend our Alpha Class which begins on February 24.

Here is what I am asking you to do. If God provides an opportunity, invite someone to come to the first class with you. We will share the Wednesday evening meal together between 5:30 and 6:00 pm in the Activity Center. Then at 6:30 we will move to room 40 in the educational building. I will speak at the first meeting about the important life questions for which Jesus is the answer. The person you bring can decide to return for the remaining classes. You may participate with them in all the classes or just bring them to the first one. But to make them feel comfortable about coming the first time, it is important for you to bring them or meet them here.

Alpha is also open to any of you who may want to explore the claims of Jesus, or if you are searching for answers about the Christian faith. We will talk about the Holy Spirit, prayer and healing. Perhaps you are interested in those topics. You will listen to a presentation and then discuss your questions in a small group. We do need to know if you are coming and if you will bring someone with you. Please call the church office and let us know or sign up at the Alpha table in the foyer.

Next Sunday I will begin a series of messages following the same themes that will be discussed in Alpha. Please consider inviting one of the persons you have been praying for to come to church next Sunday and hear what Alpha is about.

We have looked extensively at the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The younger son in the parable demanded his share of the inheritance before his father died. The father liquidated his estate and divided it between his two sons. The younger son squandered his wealth in wild living. He was broke and hungry when he came to his senses and returned to his father. He was willing to come back as a hired hand. But the father saw him from a distance and ran to meet him. He embraced him and restored him as a son. He threw a party for him to celebrate his return. Let's see how the older son responds when he discovers the party.

Luke 15:25-32

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

31" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.
32But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

Listen again to the context of this parable: "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (Luke 15:1-2) The religious leaders are indignant that Jesus eats with people who are alienated from God. Jesus should spend his time with people who are living a godly life. Jesus responds with three parables about lost things: a sheep, a coin and two sons.

Jesus redefines what it means to be spiritually lost. In the last part of the parable, he revolutionizes the understanding of what it means to be spiritually lost. The persons who heard this amazing parable were astounded at what he taught.

Jesus taught that both the younger and the older brother are alienated from the father's heart. It was obvious to everyone that the younger brother was lost. But it was radical to hear that the good son who stayed home and worked for his father was just as lost. The younger son wanted the father's things, but did not love the father. He took his father's wealth and left home. The elder son is just the same. When he returned from working in the fields and heard the celebration for the return of his younger brother, he refused to go in. This is a glorious day for his father. His lost son has returned, and he throws a party. But the elder brother does not care about his father—only himself. He is also focused on his father's things. He is upset about this fattened calf that was grilled for the party. That was his calf. Remember the father had given him the rest of his estate. Meat was a delicacy in biblical times. Why did the father give such a lavish meal for this renegade son? Why didn't he serve frozen pizza? The elder brother cares only about the cost of the catering. He does not care about his father's heart.

The father had two sons. One was a black sheep who openly rebels, wastes all his father's money and breaks all the rules. The other son is the good son who stays home, works in the family business every day and keeps all the rules. Both are spiritually lost. Neither loves the father. The father goes out to each one. He sees the younger brother while he is a long way off and runs to meet him. When the father hears that the elder brother refuses to come in to the party, he goes outside to invite him in. His invitation is very tender, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

Both sons are alienated from their father. Both want the things the father provides rather than a relationship with the father. The younger brother repents and enjoys a new relationship with his father. But the older brother is still lost at the end of the story. He remains outside. Jesus ended the story at that point on purpose.

The bad kid is saved and the good kid is lost. The good boy is not lost in spite of his goodness, but because of his goodness. The elder brother looked to his goodness to save him. Because he had been good, he believed he deserved the things of his father more than his younger brother did. The older brother was lost and did not know it. He looked good. Everyone praised him as the responsible son. He prayed, he went to church, he tithed—but he was lost.

Let's look at the signs that the elder brother was lost. Listen again to verses 28 & 29: "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! 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.'"

Seething anger is a sign that we are lost. He is angry that the younger brother is welcomed home. He is angry that the younger brother is eating the calf. He is angry that he is working hard and not having any fun. He feels that the father has cheated him. If anyone

deserved a party, he did; not his younger brother. He was not getting from his father what he deserved. He is angry about it. When we focus on the things God provides more than we focus on our relationship with God, we will find ourselves angry. We have been good; therefore God owes us blessing and protection. We are angry when he seems to bless people who are not as good as we are. We are angry when we do not get what we think we deserve from God. Seething anger is a sign we are spiritually lost.

Another sign is that we live life out of duty rather than out of beauty. "I've been slaving for you." The younger brother came home and asked to be treated like a hired man. The father restored him as a son. The older brother lived there as a son, but felt like a slave. There was no joy in what he did for the father. He worked hard and did all the right stuff so that he would get more things. He worked without joy. Those of us who are elder brothers find God useful to accomplish what we desire. We use God to help us get things. Younger brothers find God beautiful—He is an end in himself. Being with God and enjoying the relationship with him is all that matters. Elder brothers feel they are entitled to things from God because of their goodness. In our prayers we ask God for many things. We spend very little time in praise and adoration—contemplating and enjoying the presence of God. Prayer is a means to an end. It is a duty. "I'll have my quiet time today so nothing bad will happen. I'll tithe my paycheck so I won't lose my job. I'll do all the right stuff for God so I can get the stuff I want from him in return." It is all about duty, not beauty.

We can look at the life of Jesus and know this is faulty thinking. Jesus was perfect. He did everything right. He was fully obedient to the father. Yet he was homeless. He died penniless. He was tortured and killed unjustly. If doing the right stuff guarantees us the good life, then what happened to Jesus?

Another sign of the lostness of the elder brother is his arrogance. He believes he is superior to his younger brother. Why won't he come into the party? "This son of yours who

squandered your property with prostitutes.” If we get our self image and value from our performance, we look down on people whom we perceive as underachievers. If we get our self image and value from being successful, we look down on persons we consider to be failures. The elder brother looks at his younger brother with disgust. He is a loser. He does not deserve to be welcomed home. When you look around church are there people you think don't deserve to be here? If we look down on people of different races or economic status, we are an elder brother. We are lost.

If we see signs of the elder brother in us, what do we need to do? I know that I see lots of signs of the elder brother in me. I get my worth from success. I sometimes feel that God owes me, because I devoted my life to ministry. I sometimes feel like my works are a duty. There is no joy. I don't seem to just enjoy being with God. There are signs of the elder brother in most of us who have been in church very long. Now if you are thinking of someone else who you think has the elder brother problem, you are missing the point of the parable. This parable is a mirror not a window. We are not to use it to judge someone else. We are to use it to take a good hard look at ourselves. Do I see the anger in me? Do I experience the lack of joy? Is my Christian life a duty—something I have to do to earn my way into heaven and to get what I want on earth?

If you see something of the elder brother in you as I do in myself, listen to one of my favorite verses in the Bible: “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” The elder brother is mad because the father never gave him a goat for a party, but he gave the younger son a fattened calf! The father reminds him that every animal on the place is already his. He could have had the fattened calf anytime he wanted to! It was his. Elder brothers are so focused on what they are doing for God that they miss the goodness of God. The father had already given him everything. Listen to these powerful words: “You are always with me.” That is the part the elder brother missed. The meaning of life is not

about the stuff, it is about the relationship with God. The father was right there eager for a loving relationship with the son, but the son missed it.

This parable is even more amazing when we realize that Jesus is speaking these words to the religious leaders that would soon kill him. Jesus speaks tenderly to them as the elder brother. “My son.” Jesus is saying to them: “You think tax collectors and sinners are the ones who are lost. Everyone is lost—good sons and bad sons. People who are openly rebellious and those who are discreetly rebellious.” We are all lost. Whenever we depend on something other than Jesus—especially our own goodness—to save us, then we are lost. Jesus came to all of us. He comes to younger brothers and older brothers and he offers us his love and forgiveness. He comes to religious leaders just like he does to tax collectors and sinners.

Persons who think they are not lost are in the most dangerous place of all. But Jesus reaches out to those who think they are not lost. He loves uptight, self-righteous older brothers too. “He went out and pleaded with him.”

Jesus loved us so much he gave his life for all of us—the good and bad. We are all lost—hopeless without him. We are so bad that nothing less than the death of the Son of God could save us. We are so incredibly valuable that the Son of God would give his life for us.

God is running to meet you today. He wants to bring you home. But first you have to admit that you are lost even in your goodness. Will you let him bring you home?