

Hearing God's Heartbeat He Lets Us Go

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This morning we continue our series of messages entitled "Hearing God's Heartbeat." God's heart breaks for the lost—those who are separated from him. One of the greatest stories in the Bible, we call the Prodigal Son. It perhaps could better be titled: "The Parable of Two Lost Sons." God is eager to have a love relationship with each of us as his children. This morning we are going to look at the things that cause us to become separated from God and miss out on experiencing his love. As a resource for this series, I use a book entitled *The Prodigal God* by Tim Keller. You can purchase these at the welcome area of LR Praise and at the Family Promise table in the foyer.

Luke 15:11-20

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"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.

This parable describes a family that is unraveling—coming apart at the seams. The assaults on this family come from two places. The first assault is from the younger son. He goes to his father and says: "Give me my share of the inheritance." In Biblical times, the first born son got a double share of the inheritance. This man had two sons which meant the first born would get two-thirds of the estate and the younger one would get one-third when their father died. To ask to receive his share of the inheritance before his father died was equivalent to saying: "I wish you were dead so I could get the money." A typical Middle Eastern father (and perhaps most American fathers) at that point would slap the child in the

face and forcibly eject him from the house. The son would be disowned for dishonoring his father. The son would be taken out of the will completely. He would get nothing.

The son in the story made an enormous economic assault on his family. The father would have to liquidate one-third of his estate to comply. The son assaulted the reputation of his family. Everyone would know the disgrace this son had brought on his father. The son wanted out of his family. It causes tremendous pain when a child rejects his family and leaves angrily. Asking for his share of the inheritance was the ultimate insult against his father.

The older brother would also assault the family. When the younger brother came home, the father welcomed him with open arms. He forgave the assaults of his younger son. The father is overjoyed that his family will be together again. He throws a big party. The older brother comes home from working in the fields and hears the noise of the party. He refuses to go into the party. His refusal is an assault on the family. He does not want to be part of a family that welcomes home those who have disgraced them and caused economic hardship. He does not want his little brother to enjoy the benefits of the remainder of the estate. I'm sure nothing even remotely similar to this kind of family exists today!

This is a story about assault upon community—relationships. The family is the cornerstone of community. What is the source of the assault? The younger son for many years had been an obedient member of the family. But he could be obedient no longer. He had plans for his life, and he needs the financial resources of his father to fulfill his plans. His father was in the way of the money. The son wanted the things that his father could provide rather than a relationship with his father. We don't know what precipitated this demand for his share of the money. Perhaps the son had requested money to purchase something or do something and his father refused to give him the money. The son no

longer wanted to ask permission for things. He wanted total independence to spend the money as he wished on wild living.

The Bible calls this problem idolatry. An idol is anything we need in addition to Jesus Christ for our lives to have meaning and value. I can come to church, read my Bible, tithe and pray; yet my heart is focused on the Father's things rather than on the Father. I want the things God can provide: blessings, health, prosperity, safety. My motive is to get what I want from the Father. A moment of truth comes when I ask God for something and don't get what I want. I ask for healing, and it does not happen. I ask for a financial blessing, and it does not happen. If he does not come through with the things I want, then I get bitter, angry and may reject God all together. If God will not give me what I want, I'll quit wasting my time on him. I want the things God can provide rather than God. The son wanted the things his father could provide rather than a relationship with his father.

There is another example of idolatry in the story. We see it in the elder brother. When the younger son returns, the father is overjoyed. He kills the fatted calf—enough to feed 75 - 100 persons. Meat was a rare delicacy. This is a big deal. His son is home. The elder brother refuses to participate in his father's joy. Why? The elder brother knows that if the younger son becomes a part of the family again, he will benefit from what wealth is left. He will diminish the share of the estate that is rightfully his. He assaults his father by refusing to go into the party. This older son stayed home with this father. He did not rebel and leave. But his heart is just as focused on the things of the father just like his younger brother. He just looks more respectable, but he is playing the same game. The older son also wanted the things the father provided rather than a relationship with the father.

The younger brother's idolatry was the pursuit of pleasure. The elder brother's idolatry was the reward of being a good son. He was indignant because the father had never provided even a goat for a party for him. The father owed him and was not coming

through. Have you ever felt angry at God because he did not come through for you? You volunteered at church, put money in the offering plate and he let something terrible happen to you. You believe that he owes you protection in exchange for all the things you do for him. Probably no one is more guilty of this than people in the ministry. We devote our lives to doing things for God, and then something bad happens. How could God do this to me? We want the things God provides more than we want God.

There is bad boy idolatry and good boy idolatry. Both destroy relationships and community. How does idolatry tear up community? St. Augustine provides some wonderful insights from personal experience recorded in his book Confessions. He confesses that throughout his life he has struggled with two temptations: food and sex. Now I know he lived about 1700 years ago, and we do not struggle with things like food and sex today, but try to listen to what he says anyway! He pursued both food and sex relentlessly, but he was constantly empty. He could not stop pursuing them. Today we call that an addiction. He came to the realization that his problem was “disordered love.” What is “disordered love?” Augustine used murder as an example. Why does a man murder someone? There are several reasons. He may want his property. He may be afraid this person will take something that he values. He may want revenge for something that he has suffered. Why does a person commit murder? Because he loves something so much that he either must protect it all costs or have it at all costs-- even the cost of taking another person’s life. Augustine concludes that all sin, not just murder, is rooted in the same thing: loving something other than God too much. We can love success, money, food or sex more than we love God. When we love something too much, we look for it to provide ultimate meaning and value for our lives. Therefore we must have it, and we cannot live without it. The problem is that we make good things into ultimate things. It is a disordered love. Only God can provide us with ultimate meaning, value and love. Augustine summarized this reality in

the famous words: “O Lord, you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless til they find their rest in you.”

Like the sons in the parable, we seek ultimate acceptance, joy and meaning in the father’s things rather than in the father. None of those things can deliver what we seek. What is the thing that we pursue rather than God? We will know it by how we react when we can’t get it or it is threatened. The elder brother went ballistic when the younger brother returned because it threatened his inheritance. What is it that causes you to go ballistic if someone threatens to take it away?

Idolatry kills community. The family is in shambles, and the conflict is unresolved at the end of the story. When the younger assaulted his father by wishing him dead, a typical father at that point would have disowned his son. He would have hardened his heart from the rejection with anger and bitterness. But the father in Jesus story does not disown his son. He lets him go with his share of the inheritance. In order to do so, he divides his property. The word for property is “bios” which literally means “life.” The only way he could give one third of property was to sell his land. Selling land was an assault to the family. In biblical times land typically was not sold. It was passed down as an inheritance and the family lived on it for generations. The family belonged to the land. The family land was a part of their identity. To sell the land was to divide his very life. The only way to let his son go, was by tearing himself apart. He divided his life to let his son go, so that he could bring him back. The father was not interested in protecting his name, or his dignity or even his estate. He was interested in loving his son—even it meant great suffering to himself.

When the younger son came to himself, he said, “I will return to my father.” He knew that he was no longer worthy to be called his son, but he knew that his father would receive him. Why? Because he had a picture of love: a father willing to break his life apart for him.

We do not serve God because our lives will fall apart without him. We serve God because his beauty, his love attracts us. Read this story and see the father's love for both his sons. Hear God's heartbeat. That is how much the father loves you. He is constantly looking, constantly seeking for you. He loved you so much he divided his life for you. Look at the cross. Jesus loved you so much he gave his life for you. He gave his life to provide forgiveness for all your idolatry, all your rebellion, all your selfishness. "Greater love has no man than this." Look at the cross and see how much God loves you and let his love draw you to him. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Beginning this Wednesday, I want to encourage you to pray for 40 days for 4 persons to come to know how much God loves them. This is not about judging them as being non-Christians. Rather it is sensing they have not yet experienced the joy of his unconditional love. I want you to pray for persons in your family, your neighborhood, at work or school. Pray for at least 4 persons who live in Lubbock. You can pray for others, but pray for 4 who live here. The reason for that is to ask for God to provide an opportunity to invite them to attend our Alpha class beginning February 24. Alpha is a safe place where people can begin to see the beauty of God and how much he loves them. You may want to fast during this period of prayer. Who is it that you want to experience God's love?