

Hearing God's Heartbeat

He Let's Us Come to Our Senses

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This morning we continue our series of messages from Luke 15 focusing on the parable of the Prodigal Son. I am using as a resource for this series a book by Tim Keller entitled, The Prodigal God. This parable is a story about the meltdown of community and its restoration. The younger son rejects the community of his family when he asks for his share of the inheritance prior to his father's death. In essence he says to his father, "I wish you were dead." He rejects his home country by going to live in a foreign land. He rejects his faith by taking a job feeding pigs—Jewish persons considered pigs to be unclean animals. This parable shows us how relationships in community can be restored as we observe the process of the son returning home.

Luke 15:11-24

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.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

When community has broken down, what does it take to restore it? The younger son came to his senses. This is another way of saying he came to repentance. Jesus said in each of the parables in Luke 15 that there is great joy in heaven when a sinner repents.

When the father in the parable saw his son coming home, he ran and greeted him with great

joy. Repentance is the key for the love of God to explode in our lives. As Jesus began his ministry he proclaimed: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:17) Experiencing the fullness of God's love and joy begins with repentance.

Martin Luther wrote 95 Theses which began the Protestant Reformation. The first thesis was this: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent he meant the entire life of believers should be one of repentance." All of life is repentance. This is the opposite of what the world teaches us. Lord Byron said, "The weak alone repent." The world says repentance is a sign of weakness. The Bible says repentance is a sign of strength. In order to repent, we must feel incredibly loved and strong. It takes great strength to admit when you are wrong. It takes confidence in God's love to believe that he will forgive all our sin.

The son "came to his senses." Repentance begins with an awareness of our sin. The sins that cause the most problems in our lives and relationships are the ones of which we are unaware. This blindness to our sins is called denial. "Coming to our senses" is something that happens to us. It happens when we let our lives get out of control. We begin to experience pain. E. Stanley Jones said, "We do not break God's laws. We break ourselves on God's laws" When we go our own way rather than God's way, we go against the created order of the universe. Eventually it puts a strain on our lives and leads to a meltdown. As the A.A. folks say, we hit bottom. The first step of the 12 Steps of AA says: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable." It takes a lot of pain to get to the point that our denial is broken. Alcoholics don't believe they have a problem. They are blind to it. Everyone else can see it; but they can't see it. Our problem may be different from alcohol addiction, but we all have some problem which we cannot see.

The turning point is something that comes to us. "He came to his senses." We have to respond to it when it comes. We can miss it. The times in life when we see ourselves most

clearly don't come on command. "I think today I'm going to see myself as I really am!" It does not work that way. It comes to us, and we respond. Repentance comes in response to those moments when the Holy Spirit breaks us open, and we see the truth about ourselves. These moments usually occur during times of pain: loss of job, breaking apart of marriage or family, loss of a loved one or locked in a prison cell.

I never thought of myself as a perfectionist. I did not mind a dirty car or a cluttered desk. Only perfectionists were bothered by such things, therefore I couldn't be a perfectionist. I was aware of many other sins in my life, but I was totally blind to this one and how it hurt my relationships with others. It took the pain of divorce to come to my senses. I discovered that perfectionists were persons who had a high need to be right all the time and a need to control things. It came to me that I had inflicted hurt on others by my need to be right all the time. It came to me how this affected my relationship with God. I thought for God to accept me I needed to be right. When I repented of my perfectionism and self-righteous, I experienced a deeper level of God's grace and love than I had ever experienced. I struggle with perfectionism and control, but now I can recognize it sooner and take it God and let him handle it. I am much more aware when it is taking hold of me. Repentance begins in the midst of pain when we see ourselves as we really are. "He came to his senses."

When the younger son responds, he says, "I will go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' " Notice he says he sinned against heaven. I thought he sinned against his father by demanding his share of the inheritance prematurely. Coming to our senses means that we realize our sin is ultimately against God. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. He had sinned against her husband Uriah. But in Psalm 51, we find the record of David's repentance. He says: "Against God and God only have I

sinned.” (Psalm 51:4) Repentance begins with realizing that all sin is ultimately against the goodness and greatness of God. We have gone against his way for our lives and have gone our own way. Sometimes we just regret the mess that we have made of our lives and focus on the pain that it has caused us. We forget that our mess has caused hurt to God and others. Repentance begins when we quit focusing on ourselves and focus on what we have done wrong before God and others.

The younger son also confesses that he has sinned against his father. He becomes aware of how his sin has affected not only God but his father at home. Full repentance deals with both the vertical and horizontal relationships in our lives. The younger son knows that restoration must occur with both God and man.

We also see in the younger son that repentance means accepting full responsibility for our sin. Notice that the younger son does not try to shift the blame. He does not say, “I messed up, dad, but it was your fault for not giving me everything I wanted. If you had given me the things I asked for, I would never have left home. It’s your fault I left.” Instead he owns up to sin: “I have sinned.” Repentance means accepting full responsibility for my sin without blaming anyone else.

The younger son adds a condition to his return that nearly blows the whole thing. He plans to say to his father, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.” A “hired man” is a laborer who would earn a daily wage for working on the farm. What is implied here is that the younger son wants a job on his father’s farm. He does not intend to live in his father’s house as a son. He will live with the hired day laborers. He will earn money and will pay his father the money that he took. In other words, he intends to make restitution. Now, if you have wronged someone, this is an important step.

However, this parable is really not primarily about human relationships. It is clear that the father in the parable is God. For the sins we have committed against God, we cannot make restitution. Therefore the father does not allow the younger son to carry out his plan. He sees him from far away. He runs to greet him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. What does this say to us about the heart of God? No matter how much we have messed up, God is eager to restore a relationship with us. When we turn toward home, he runs to meet us. The younger son knows how much he is loved before he repents to his father. His father is embracing the younger son when he says: "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Do you remember the next line he had rehearsed? "Treat me as one of your hired men." The father never lets him say that next line! Repentance means admitting that you have sinned and that you are not worthy of forgiveness. However, we cannot make restitution to God. That is the difference between Christianity and every other religion in the world. All other religions say that we have to make restitution to God ourselves. We have to follow certain rules to earn God's approval and pay off the debt we owe him. But the message of the gospel is that there is nothing we can do to for God that will make restitution for our sin. God must do it for us. God himself became man and took our sins into himself. He died on a cross so that our sins would die with him. And he rose to life so that we could receive the gift of new life. God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Every other religion in the world is about what we do for God. Christianity is about what God has done for us.

So the father in the parable will not allow his younger son to even make his speech about becoming a hired man—earning his father's approval. Instead the father throws a party and puts a robe and ring on his son—ways of declaring that this young man was fully restored as a son in the family. Not because of what the son had done, but because of the

father's love for him. Repentance unleashes the love and joy of heaven when we accept that we have sinned and we cannot save ourselves.

During this series I have asked you to pray for 4 persons for 40 days. If you have not identified all 4 persons you might think about persons you know who are experiencing some pain in their lives—loss, transition, emptiness. Perhaps someone is expressing to you that their lives are out of control, unmanageable. Perhaps someone has expressed that they don't know where to turn or what to do. Invite them to come hear the good news about a God who loves them and wants them to come home. Invite them to church. Encourage them to attend our Alpha class which begins on Wednesday, February 24. Alpha is a safe place where they can explore the good news of Jesus Christ and what he has done for them.

Who are you praying for to know and experience the good news of God's grace and forgiveness?