

# Hearing God's Heartbeat He Embraces Us

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This morning we continue with our series of messages entitled "Hearing God's Heartbeat." As we listen to the parables of Jesus we gain an understanding of what is on God's heart. The parables in Luke 15 tell us that God is looking for us and wants us to return home. One parable is about a lost sheep that a shepherd brings home. Another parable is about a lost son whose father is looking for him and runs to meet him. During this series I'm asking you to pray for 4 persons you know who need to experience God's love and forgiveness. Pray for God to open a door to share his love with them, invited them to church or to our Alpha Class beginning February 24. We have been focusing primarily on this parable we know as "the Prodigal Son." I am using as a resource for this series a book by Tim Keller entitled The Prodigal God. Tim points out that one of the main messages of this parable is forgiveness. Let's see what we learn about forgiveness from this parable.

## **Luke 15:11-24**

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

<sup>13</sup>"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. <sup>14</sup>After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup>He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup>"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! <sup>18</sup>I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'<sup>20</sup>So 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.

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

<sup>22</sup>"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. <sup>23</sup>Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup>For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

What do we learn about the heart of God and how he forgives us? First of all we see that forgiveness is assertive. When the father sees his son a long way off, he runs to him and embraces him. This is not how most fathers would respond after what this son had

done. This son was arrogant and selfish. The son deeply wounded his father by asking for his share of the inheritance while the father was alive. In essence he was saying: “Father, I wish you were dead so I could have your money.” Most fathers seeing this son return home would have thought, “What nerve he has coming back after what he has done. Surely he just wants more money.” The father in the parable does not know anything about what is on the son’s heart when he sees him at a distance. He does not wait to find out. He runs to him and embraces him before the son utters a word. The father freely offers forgiveness. When we forgive, it is an assertive act. Jesus said in Mark 11:25: “When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him.” This verse does not say, wait until they come to you, grovel at your feet and beg for forgiveness. It says take the initiative. Forgive them whether they have asked for it or not. Don’t stand on the porch waiting. Initiate the forgiveness process first—be assertive. This is what God does for us. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6)

We may only need to forgive the other person in our heart. It may not be necessary to go to them and say “I forgive you” if the person is unrepentant and unchanged. This is especially true if a family member has abused you. They may interpret your offer of forgiveness as saying what they did was all right. They may consider it an invitation to resume the abuse. You do need to forgive this person in your heart, but it does not necessarily mean that you will reestablish a relationship with them if their heart is unchanged. We really need to be discerning about when to tell another person we forgive them. We can always be assertive about forgiving in our heart because it sets us free from resentment and grudges and bitterness that can destroy us.

We also see in this parable that forgiveness is sacrificial. There are two ways the younger son wronged his father. He wronged him financially by taking 1/3 of the estate and squandering it. This had tremendous economic impact on the family. Many of our estates

were reduced by 1/3 or more during the economic crisis. We know how this affects everything. To regain the loss is exceedingly difficult. The younger son also wronged his father by disgracing him. When he said, "I wish you were dead," the father lost face in the community. In an honor-based culture, he was robbed of his status. When the son returns, he knows he needs to deal with the debts he owes his father. To deal with the financial debt, he asks his father to hire him as a day laborer. As he receives his wages, he will use them to pay back his father. To deal with the debt of disgracing his father, the son says, "I am no longer worthy to be called you son. I no longer deserve to call you my father or to be treated like a son."

The father will not let him repay either debt. He forgives him and welcomes him back as a son. We need to be careful not to misinterpret the parables. It is important to recognize that this is a parable about God's love. It is not a parable about proper parenting skills. For example, this parable is not intended to provide a model for parents about how to treat an adult child who is an addict. To offer financial support to someone who is a practicing addict is not good for the person—it just enables their destructive behavior.

The purpose of this parable is to tell us how God's love and forgiveness works. The father runs. In that culture it was a very demeaning thing for a patriarch to run. Normally the person of inferior status would be expected to come to the person of superior status. Instead the father runs to the son. He does not walk; he runs. He had to pick up his robe and bare his legs to run. It was considered extremely undignified for a man to do this. He goes to his son and before he can say a word, the father embraces him and kisses him. He will not allow the son to pay back the debts he owes. He puts a signet ring on his finger which gave him status as a son. The ring was used to seal contracts on behalf of the family. The father says, "I'm not going to let you pay back the debt. I am going to absorb the losses myself." Forgiveness is sacrificial. The one giving forgiveness offers to absorb the debt. When

someone wrongs you, they have robbed you of something: happiness, reputation, opportunity, money. Therefore they owe you for what they have taken from you. You can either respond by seeking to make them pay or you can pay it yourself. Normally we want to make the other person pay. If they smeared our reputation, we want to make them pay by smearing them back. If they took away an opportunity, we want them to give it back or we want to take an opportunity away from them. We want to inflict pain. Forgiveness means you pay. Forgiveness is absorbing pain rather than inflicting it. Forgiveness is costly. It always involves suffering when we absorb the pain.

The father runs and embraces his son. How could he do that? Because for months he had been embracing his son in his heart. He had absorbed the pain of the financial loss and the disgrace. He forgave his son before the son even thought about returning home. He could have been clobbering his son in his heart all this time. “That ungrateful little \_\_\_\_\_.” If the father had been clobbering his son in his heart, he never would have run to his son. Instead he sacrificially absorbed the pain and forgave his son. Absorbing the pain can be very dangerous if we are not filled with God’s power to handle it. We cannot absorb the pain of loss in our own strength.

This leads us to the third aspect of forgiveness we see in the parable. Forgiveness is possible only through God’s strength and love. The father “was filled with compassion.” Notice this is a passive tense “was filled.” The filling with compassion was not self-induced. The compassion came from outside and filled him. God filled his heart with compassion which enabled him to forgive—to run and embrace his son. As we read the gospels, we see that there is one primary word that is used to describe the emotions of Jesus. It is the word “compassion.” Jesus has compassion on two blind men and touched their eyes and healed them. (Matthew 20:34) Matthew tells us when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on

them. (Matthew 9:36) Compassion means to be moved from the very depths of your being to love someone.

The father was filled with compassion, with God's love. He did not stay on the porch, he ran. He made himself vulnerable. If someone you love has rejected you, it hurts deeply, and you never want to risk getting hurt again. The father runs to his son putting himself at risk. The son might reject him again or disappoint him by asking for money. The father became vulnerable. John 1 tells us that Jesus came to his own, but his own received him not. Jesus came from heaven to earth to embrace us knowing that we would reject him and even kill him. He made himself totally vulnerable so he could offer us forgiveness. Why did Jesus do that? Filled with compassion, he chose to absorb the debt we owed him. We rejected God and went our own way. God gave us everything—our lives our resources. We took it all and wasted it. We lived out our plans rather than his plans. We owe him an unimaginable debt. So what does God do? He does not stay on the porch in heaven and wait for us to come groveling back. He ran from heaven to earth to pay our debt and absorb the loss into himself. On the cross Jesus absorbed our debt. He took into himself your sin and my sin and the sin of the whole world. He died in our place so that we could be forgiven. He paid the price for us that we could not pay.

As the praise chorus says: "He paid a debt he did not owe, I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away. And now I sing a brand new song: 'Amazing Grace.' Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay."

Because we have been forgiven, the compassion of God fills us and enables us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness means we release liability. I no longer desire to make this person pay me back. It is not saying that what they did was OK. It is saying that what they did was wrong, but I'm not going to make them pay. I release them from the debt. I release myself from seeking to get even.

Forgiveness results in resurrection. The father told his servants, “This son of mine was dead and is alive again.” Forgiveness enables us to live again. When we are filled with bitterness, resentment, hatred toward someone who has wronged us—we die inside. Forgiveness enables us to be resurrected to new life. It sets us free. It also sets the other person free and opens the possibility for restored relationship. The son could have rejected his father’s offer of forgiveness. He could have asked for more money to enable him to return to the far country. If so, there would have been no restoration of the relationship. But instead he chose to repent and seek his father’s forgiveness. He had a changed heart. There was restoration of the relationship. The son who was dead was now alive. But even if the son had not repented, the father would have still been free. The compassion in his heart gave him new life whether his son came back or not.

God left heaven to run and meet you. He falls on your neck and embraces you even before you repent. He is filled with compassion and love for you. How will you respond? That decision is a matter of life or death.