



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Facing Our Stuff (*Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits*)

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We believe Jesus was God in the flesh. He died on the cross for the sins of the world, was buried and rose again. We often say that Jesus, once and for all, conquered sin and death. Well, what do we mean by that? What do we mean by that statement, “Jesus conquered death”? Paul writes to the Corinthians, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” One might respond, “Just about everywhere I look, now that you ask.” We live in a world filled with suffering and death and dying. So, what do we mean that Jesus conquered death?

It’s very important to understand that the Bible talks about two different kinds of death. There is the death we all see and understand--physical death. But there is a greater, more significant death, which the Bible refers to as spiritual death, more significant because it is a death that will last forever. One of the ways to think about the relationship between physical death and spiritual death is, to think about the fact that all of us are in a process of dying. We see all around us the reminders that there is such a thing as death. And we know whether we live 20 years or 50 years or 70 years or 90 years, we’re still in a process of dying. Think of that as God’s warning shots, constantly reminding us that there is yet a greater death, spiritual death, and if that death is not dealt with before we die physically, we will be spiritually dead forever.

That raises the question, “Who is spiritually dead? Who is spiritually alive?” Jesus said that He came to seek and to save those who were lost. “Okay, who are the lost? Who is it that needs to be found?” If you have a Bible, turn with us to Luke 15, a familiar story, often referred to as The Prodigal Son. I think a better name could be something like, “A Father and His Two Sons”. But we need to start with Verses One and Two of Chapter 15 to set the context for Jesus’ story.

Now all the tax-collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (*NASB, Luke 15:1-2)

If you’ve read through the Gospels, this is a very familiar scene. As a matter of fact, the verb tenses here would say that sinners and tax collectors were constantly coming to Jesus. And if you read through the Gospels, you’ll find that’s true. And it consistently irritated the religious crowd. The scribes and the Pharisees would be the religious elite, and they would stand off to the side and grumble and wonder, “Why would Jesus spend time with such people?”

You might say there are three characters as we open this chapter. There’s Jesus; there are the sinners and there are the religious elite. Jesus then launches into three stories, “The Lost Sheep”, “The Lost Coin” and we pick it up in Verse 11:

And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me ' So he divided his wealth between them. And

not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be impoverished. So, he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.” (vs. 11-16)

The father had two sons, a younger son and an older son. In the typical Jewish home, the older son would get two-thirds of the inheritance; the younger son would get one-third. We know from the Jewish literature, it was considered to be very inappropriate for a son to ask for the inheritance before the father’s decision to give it, typically right before death. But, going against conventional wisdom, the selfish younger son demands his third. The text says he leaves to go to a distant country. We might say to a place where the grass is greener; it’s the same idea there. He wanted to get away from home; he wanted to get away from the rules and the restrictions and he wanted to live. As long as he had his money, he had friends, and I’m sure he partied it up. But it wasn’t long until the money was gone. Then the friends were gone and then he found himself in a miserable state: hired on to help feed pigs, finding himself longing to eat the food that the pigs ate.

Now I don’t suppose that the young son got up one morning and said, “I think I’ll ruin my life today.” I think he honestly believed this was the way to happiness. This was the road that would lead to fulfillment. He decided, in essence, to become his own savior, to be his own god, to save his own life, to get away from the limitations at home and to live it up a little bit, because he was convinced life was better out there.

I don’t think anybody gets up in the morning and says, “I think I’ll ruin my life today.” But the fact of the matter is, there are probably quite a few “younger sons” here this morning. You’ve decided you, too, are going to run your own show; you’re going to be your own savior; you’re going to call your own shots; you’re going to do as you please. Nobody’s going to tell you what to do, not your mom or dad, not your boss, not religion, not God Himself, because you’re absolutely convinced that’s the way to be happy. That’s what’s ultimately going to deliver the goods.

So, let me ask you a question this morning. Honestly, “How’s that working for you? Pretty happy, are you? Seeing all your dreams fulfilled? Living it up every day? Couldn’t be happier?” You know, over the years, it doesn’t really surprise me that “younger sons” take this path. I can understand that. What surprises me, even yet after all these years, is how many are unwilling to admit that they’re miserable. They’re so determined to convince themselves this is the right way, that even when they find themselves eating with the pigs, they’re still trying to convince themselves and others, “Hey, I’m living it up!”

One of the shows I like to watch on television is “Survivor Man”. On one occasion he and a friend of his are supposedly lost somewhere in the forest, and they get themselves intentionally lost, so that a search and rescue team can practice finding them and rescuing them. So, after they’re lost for a certain amount of time, the search and rescue team are launched and, really in amazing fashion, in a very short amount of time, they find them. As they’re loading up, Survivor Man makes the statement that many people, even after being lost for many days in the forest, when the rescue team finds them, will still not admit they were lost. And then he says something, I think, very perceptive. He says it’s that very attitude that got them lost in the first place.

How many “younger sons” have made their lives miserable? It may include alcohol; it may include drugs; it may include any number of destructive ways to cope on a daily basis, but they’re unwilling to say, “This was the wrong path!”

Verse 17:

"But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." '

"So, he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate." (vs. 17-24)

The young son determines that back home, even as a hired man, he would live better than he was living among the pigs. So, he rehearses this speech that he’s going to deliver when he gets home. Clearly, for whatever reason, the son never really understood the compassionate heart of his father. And so, he determined his father would not take him back, other than perhaps as a hired man or even as a slave. So, he begins his journey home. But, before he can get home, his father spots him a long way off and, in what we would refer to as culturally shocking behavior, his father ran to meet his son.

Culturally shocking, because even though that behavior may not shock us today, you have to understand, for the first century listener or the first century reader, that behavior was completely inappropriate. That behavior was completely unexpected, to the point of being scandalous. In an authoritative culture, the father was expected to stay home, and his son would have to grovel, make his speech, and over a period of time, perhaps, earn his way back into some level of family relationship. The response of the father is totally unexpected. The father runs to meet his son. His son starts to deliver his prepared speech and the father doesn’t even take time to listen. He wants the best robe thrown on him; he wants sandals for his feet; he wants the family ring to put on the finger of his son meaning, “You’re once again my son!” And they kill the fatted calf. A Jewish family would have eaten meat once or twice a year. This would have been an exceptional moment: this grand reunion as the father embraces his son, “He was dead! Now he’s alive! He was lost! Now he is found!”

There’s no question the younger son represents the sinners and the tax collectors of Verse One. It’s no wonder they spent so much time with Jesus, because they found in Jesus this heart of

compassion that longed to embrace them and offer them forgiveness. But of course, the story's not over.

Verse 25:

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found.'" (vs. 25-32)

The older brother is out in the field doing his duty, and he hears the sounds of a party, comes in and wants to know what's going on. The servant tells him, I'm guessing pretty excitedly, that this is a great occasion. His brother has come home, and his father has received him back and he's having a party to celebrate. But the older son is angry, and he won't go in. So, once again, the father goes out to meet an estranged son and he pleads with him. He begs him to come in, to join the party. In very disrespectful terms, the older son says, "Now look, I have served you dutifully, faithfully. All my life I've kept the rules; I've kept every commandment; I've done everything you've asked. You've never thrown me a party; you've never had a celebration for me." And he absolutely refused to go in.

It's interesting how this story ends. It doesn't really conclude; it just stops. At the end of the story, the older brother is still on the outside, unwilling to go in. It looks very much like Verses 1 and 2. The father had two estranged sons. One was estranged because he was very bad. One was estranged because he was very good. Both sons estranged, the father had to go out to meet them both. The older son was very clear. He had not served his father because he loved him. He had not been motivated by his relationship with his father. He'd been motivated by a sense of duty, a sense of obligation, because deep in his heart he wanted his loot, just like his younger brother.

Arnie: Bryan, up until now, just about every teaching I've had on the Prodigal Son focused on the Prodigal Son, but you've really focused on the other son today. Why is that so important?

Bryan: So, there's three players: Jesus, the older brother, and the younger brother that's the Prodigal. But what sets up the story is, the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus why he spent so much time with sinners and tax collectors. There's no question in the story; they're the older brother. So, if you understand the context, that's why he's telling the story. So, they're featured in the story. They're the older brother, they're full of self-righteousness. They've done everything right and honestly; they don't need a savior. They're not sick, they don't need a doctor.

Cara: You have to admit that that younger son made life pretty miserable for a lot of people. It's easy to get irritated with somebody like that, unless you understand that the only reason you have a home with a Father is because of His grace.

Bryan: Yeah. So, we're all messed up. We're all in need of a Savior. I often refer to us: Berean is just a gathering of misfits, sinners and losers who have been made right by the power of Jesus. But sin is messy. That's why Jesus came. That's the whole point. And that's what makes grace so amazing.

Arnie: So, we see how to respond to the younger son, but what is the right response to the older son? What does that look like?

Bryan: So great question, and I'm going to start by saying it's much harder. I can address the Prodigal Son and understand what to do. It's much easier than the self-righteous, older son. So, I have to remind myself, I need to show the same amount of grace to the self-righteous, "older son" as I do to the Prodigal. And in my experience, it usually takes something pretty hard to get the attention of the self-righteous, "older sons" and cause them to back up and rethink things. So sometimes it's just a matter of patiently waiting and hoping to be there when that moment happens. But they're very hard to reach, actually.

Cara: I wonder if the older brother started off with his heart in the right place, and then got off track. Just like a lot of people in the church, they start off with this really great attitude, but then somewhere along the line, they just get tripped up.

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's probably likely, wanting to be obedient, trying to do the right thing. But it's a form of legalism. And Paul tells us legalism feeds the flesh; our flesh actually loves that. It's a form of self-righteousness, which all flows out of our desire to be God, and to make ourselves good enough. So, in some ways, it's a natural bent. It's the default mode. And I think a lot of people with good intentions end up in a self-righteous posture that isn't good.

Arnie: So, Bryan, we focused a lot on spiritual death today, but there's also physical death. So, what can we do to help someone who has lost a loved one, especially in this time of year when we're supposed to be thankful?

Bryan: Yeah, great question. And it's difficult. I mean, there's no magic in these moments. There are no magic words to say. There's nothing that makes the pain go away. But some things to think about. One is just presence. When you've gone through those moments yourself, you just have friends that are there. And that matters. I think listening; you don't have to correct everybody's misunderstandings in that moment. They're just talking and they're hurting. So just a listening ear. And then, I think also just the question, what do you need from me right now? Because everybody's different, and it's hard to figure that out. And that's just a practical, helpful question.