

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Facing Our Stuff

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: Facing Death Pt. 2

Release Date: Monday 11/25/19

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."

(*NASB, Luke 15:11-16)

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. 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.

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". You've decided you, too, are going to run your own show; you're going to live your own life; 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, "Hey, how's that working for you?" 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!" Thankfully, the younger son had more sense than that.

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. 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.

You have to understand, for the first century listener or the first century reader, that behavior was completely inappropriate. 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!"

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. 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.

Both brothers decided to be their own saviors, one by being really bad, one by being really good, both estranged from the father. I find myself wondering, if the younger son didn't leave home, because he just couldn't stand one more day with his older brother, one more critical look, one more judgment, one more day of his brother looking down on him. He couldn't take it, so he left.

Churches are filled with "older brothers"; many, many, many "younger brothers" have fled the church. They couldn't take it anymore. They couldn't take the criticism; they couldn't take the judgment; they couldn't take the self-righteousness. So, they flee, and, in the process, they think they're fleeing Christianity, because they think the older brother represents Christianity. He does not; he does not! The older brother represents religious moralism, self-righteousness. Jesus is represented by the father. The father represents Christianity. It is something other, and it is something wonderful.

Over the years, I've noticed that on Easter Sunday, there is an attraction for both the "younger sons" and the "older sons", but for very different reasons. Oftentimes, the "younger sons" come because somebody drags them. They're not really sure they want to be here. But some younger sons come because, deep down in their hearts, there is still a flicker of hope, where they want to believe that even though they've made a mess of their lives, it's possible that God could still want them.

What a joy it is to know, that no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done, all you have to do is take one step toward God, and God comes running, like the father, to embrace you, and forgive you, and welcome you home. He longs to do that.

The "older brothers" come for a different reason. They come because they have to. I mean, where else would the older brother be on the biggest religious holiday of the year? You have to be in church on Easter Sunday. It's part of the requirement; it's part of the duty. You're going to check it off the list. But if the older sons were to be honest, they're not here because of a passionate love relationship with the Savior. They're here because it's part of being good. They are driven by a fear-based, compliant way of life. They are here out of religious tradition--because that's part of what it means to be good.

The father had two sons that were estranged: One by being really bad, one by being really good, both, in essence, seeking to become their own savior. But, interestingly enough, the story ends with the younger son, at some point, recognizing the foolishness of his way, and embracing the father. But the older son, in his goodness, still remains outside. It looks very much like Verses One and Two. Sadly, that may, at the end of the day, be the truth.

There are two ways to become your own savior. One is by being bad; one is by being good. Those who choose the path of the younger son often hit a point of brokenness and decide that eating with the pigs isn't really where it's at, and, in brokenness, they come home. The lost is

found; they know they need a Savior. But sadly, at the end of the day, oftentimes it's the older brothers that stay on the outside, because, in their goodness, they have convinced themselves, they can be good enough. They can be their own savior. Yet the Bible is very clear that no one can be good enough; no one can be their own savior. Who's lost? We're all lost! We all need to be found. Who's spiritually dead? We're all spiritually dead and can only be made spiritually alive through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

The fact of the matter is, the death of Jesus on the cross is a historical fact. The resurrection of Jesus, the empty tomb, it is a historical fact. The only question mark we're left with is, "Who will embrace the Savior?" Every single person will face physical death; we're all in the process of dying. But it's only when you have dealt with spiritual death and, through Jesus as Savior, been made spiritually alive, that you are rightly prepared to face physical death. Those who have been made spiritually alive know that physical death is simply now the transition from this world to the Paradise to come. Death is no longer the victor. Death is no longer the winner, to those who have embraced Jesus as Savior.

Our Father, we're thankful that Jesus came to be the Savior of the world. Lord, there are "younger brothers" and there are "older brothers", those avoiding You by being bad, and those avoiding You by being really good. Lord, You are calling to their hearts to come, to embrace the Father, to acknowledge a need for a Savior, to experience spiritual life now and forever, embracing the Savior who loves them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Cara: Bryan, this is such a great message. Thank you for this. The story of the father and his two sons has a lot of meaning. The context is really important in this. Jesus is telling this parable and who is he telling it to?

Bryan: Yeah, so those are all the right questions, and I think sometimes people miss that. The background of what's happening is the religious leaders, the Pharisees are complaining, they're grumbling, because Jesus is spending time with sinners and tax collectors. And that's what causes Jesus to launch into this story.

Arnie: Bryan, can you give us an example of what the younger son looks like today?

Bryan: Yeah, so good question. I think in the story he's the sinners and the tax collectors; so anyone trying to satisfy themselves, meet their needs through the things of this world. Maybe we'd say the non-religious crowd, since the older brother is the religious crowd.

Arnie: You said the older brother today isn't necessarily a Christian, which really surprised me, but a religious moralist. Is that like a legalist?

Bryan: That's a great question. And the older brother often gets identified as kind of a legalistic Christian, but in the story the father represents Jesus, and the older brother represents the Pharisees, self-righteous. And then the younger son represents the sinners and the tax collectors. So, I don't think he's representing Christians. I think he's representing the self-righteous moralists, who think they can make it to God without Christ, by their own merits.

Arnie: Do you think it's helpful to identify your child who's walked away as a Prodigal?

Bryan: I don't know. I mean there's probably levels of that, more or less. I don't like the labels. I'd rather just look at him as a person.

Arnie: And say they've lost their way.

Bryan: Yeah. Be thoughtful and strategic about what the way back might look like. Because honestly, of the two brothers, I'd rather have a Prodigal than an "older brother", because the Prodigals typically are going to find their way. The older brother: just read the story, he doesn't come back in.

Arnie: Well, and one thing's for certain, I was called the Prodigal for like 26 years, and it's not a compliment, nor does it make you feel good.

Bryan: No, I agree.

Cara: So, the older son is the Pharisees, but I'm just wondering, do you think that that older son started off okay? Can you tell?

Bryan: Yeah, great question. And I would say, it's really hard to tell. There's nothing in the text that tells us one way or the other, because it isn't just what you're doing, it's why you're doing what you're doing, that is really the issue. If I was to guess, I'm going to guess he was always motivated by some level of self-righteousness.

Arnie: So especially as we get older, how do we not become like the older son, being outraged by some of these lifestyles? Because really the older son was just as lost, wasn't he?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. And I would even say, I think more so. When Haddon Robinson used to talk to us about preaching, he'd say, "A good sermon needs to conclude, not just stop." Well this story doesn't conclude. It just stops. [Right.] And it stops with this sobering reality that the younger son finally does come home, but the older brother stays outside. And my experience as a pastor would be the older brothers are way more difficult to reach than those that go wayward-they hit bottom and they come back. So, I think the how would be to believe the truth. James refers to the Word of God as a mirror. So, the way to avoid self-righteousness is look in the mirror, and the Bible is pretty clear about our sin before a Holy God.

Cara: We've been learning about that "Sin-Sorry, Sin-Sorry cycle"; you've mentioned it several times. Really, if the younger son had thought only of himself, he would have been sorry, but not repentant. And he would have sat in a pile of despair then, I think. But instead, he thought about his dad and he came home, broken and repentant.

Bryan: Yeah, so you're right. He faced reality and he saw his need. So, he recognized he can't fix it and he needed help. You know, there's a reason why we call broken, broken, and that is, you're broken. You need help, can't fix yourself. And there's a lot of people that, they never get that. They never reach that point, and so they never really think they need a savior.

Cara: Can you be in a relationship with God without repentance?

Bryan: I think at the beginning there has to be a clear understanding: I can't save myself. So that's a change of direction. I need a Savior. That's the initial repentance that would be absolutely necessary. Beyond that, then as a Christ follower, we get confused and lose our way and

struggle. But along the way, without true repentance, we're never really going to grow. We're never really going to follow the path that Jesus has for us.

Arnie: Bryan, I know my mom prayed for me for 26 years as a Prodigal in her life, and she told me she prayed every single day for me in it, and I believe her, but I never thought, does this story really give a person with the Prodigal hope?

Bryan: I think it gives them lots of hope. I see Prodigals as a pastor all the time. They hit bottom and it's a mess, but that's what turns them, and causes them to seek out Jesus. One of the things that I always keep in my back pocket is I believe with all my heart, nobody's truly happy without Jesus. People fake it. They try to convince everybody, but they're not. And so, at the end of the day, what they're looking for can only be found in a relationship with Christ. And you hope that people hit bottom, and at some point, choose to look at Jesus. But again, the bigger concern to me is the older brother. You know, after 30 some years as a pastor, I still struggle with trying to understand how to reach the religious self-righteous crowd. They just don't need Jesus. And that's very hard to change.

Cara: I know that gives me hope. My kids are 13 and 11 and this story gives me hope, because the future is so uncertain. But I know that the possibility of them falling away and then coming back, at least gives me something. Because that's, as a mom, my biggest fear, is that they don't cling to Christ. So, Bryan, this story is ultimately about spiritual life and unfortunately, death. So why did you choose this story to talk about facing death? Who's a greater concern then, the Prodigal son or the self-righteous son?

Bryan: Yeah, so we've talked about, this self-righteous son, I think, is the greater concern. But the reason I chose this story is because, what people are expecting, when we talk about facing death, is physical death. And I would suggest, physical death is actually a metaphor for the greater death, which is spiritual death. So, the only way to really prepare yourself to face the inevitable physical death, is that you have faced the greater death. And in the midst of that, you have found a Savior, so that we know that when we die physically, that's not the end of the story. So, it was a way to try and get people to think about, you'll never have what you need to face physical death, until you first face the reality of spiritual life and death.

Arnie: So, Bryan, it sounds like the older brother has a very negative testimony in the church.

Bryan: Yeah, I'd say that's absolutely true. So even this story, you wonder if part of the dynamic was the younger son wanted to leave home to get away from his older brother. And I can tell you, I've just had dozens and dozens of conversations with Prodigals, who ran because of "older brothers", so to speak, in the church, who were so judgmental and so unkind, that they just run to get away from it. And sadly, they think they're running from Christianity, but they're running from this self-righteous "older brother". And it does do a lot of damage.