



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 20, 2013

"Parable of the Waiting Father (Part 2)"

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

This is the parable of the waiting father, part two. Last week, we began the parable about a younger son who rudely asked his father for his inheritance early. It was tantamount to him saying, "Dad, I can't wait for you to die, so please give me my inheritance now."

In Jewish culture back then, the older brother inherits two thirds of the estate and the younger brother gets one third. In the parable, the father gives the younger son one third of the estate early even though the father has not died. The son takes the money, moves to a faraway place and foolishly squanders all of his money.

He comes to his senses and realizes he has totally messed up and that he had treated his dad unlovingly. He decides to come home.

He sees his dad coming down the road to meet him at his return, and instead of condemning him, his dad gives him his robe, a ring, and sandals for his feet, and kills the fatted calf so that the whole town might celebrate with him for his son who was lost is now found.

We now pick up on part two of the parable where the father now has to deal with his older son. Turn to Luke 15, verse 25.

Luke 15:25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing."

Luke 15:26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

Luke 15:27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Luke 15:28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

Luke 15:29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.'

Luke 15:30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Luke 15:31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'

Luke 15:32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Ah, the drama of life. Let's take a look at this passage.

The father throws a huge party for his younger son who was a deceiver and a betrayer; throw in there rude, spoiled, and arrogant. But this

son has come to his senses and has returned home.

The father is so overjoyed that he orders his slaves to kill his biggest, fattest, and most tender calf. The family throws a huge, gigantic, welcome-home reception for the younger son. There is music and dancing.

The elder son is out in the field, probably working very hard as a dutiful son would. After a very strenuous day of a good honest day's work, he heads home. As he gets closer, he hears something. He hears music and laughter. He is thinking, "What the heck is going on?"

So he sees a slave and says, "Hey you there. What's going on?" And the slave says, "Haven't you heard? Your brother has returned, and your father has killed the fatted calf to celebrate his safe return!" They the elder son says, "No way!"

The Bible says the elder brother becomes angry. When he gets to the house, he is so angry and upset that he refuses to go in. What is he so mad about?

First, he is mad because his dad had the fatted calf—the best and the juiciest calf—killed.

Historical background on this: Middle eastern people back then hardly ever eat meat, unless there is a party.

But the most expensive thing to serve for a party is the fatted calf, the most precious calf of the village. Veal extraordinaire!

Let's go deeper. The second reason the elder son is mad is that his inheritance is now going to be smaller. Here's the math: since the younger son took his one-third of the inheritance, that meant the rest of the inheritance, yes, all the rest, would be the elder son's. The younger son blew all of his money, but who cares? The elder son still has his two-thirds left, or so he thought.

But now that the younger son is back and is fully restored to the family, that means the younger son gets another one-third. That's one-third of the two-thirds that is left for the elder brother. Which means the elder brother gets two-thirds of the two-thirds; it's a much smaller portion.

The elder son is saying, "Dad gave away what is rightfully mine. Dad gave away my stuff. And now he is giving away even more to that jerk of a brother."

But we need to understand that the elder brother is as much of a jerk, if not a worse jerk. How so? Let's continue in the story.

The elder son refuses to go into the house. He is mad at dad. But notice how it says in verse 28 that the father comes out of the house to go to his son to plead with him.

Once again the father goes out to the son, just like how he ran out of the house and down the road to meet the younger son when the son returned. The father initiates the relationship in both situations.

But before the father can say anything, the elder son goes into his rap and rage.

He says disrespectfully to his father, "Listen (not Father dear)! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you. I have never disobeyed your command, and yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends."

Do you hear what he is saying? "After all I have done for you, after being such a good person, after all the commands I have followed you never rewarded me not even with goat cheese pizza with my friends. Never! I have a long record of doing good and what do I get? Nothing!"

Friends, is this the kind of relationship we have with our heavenly father? When things go wrong in our lives or others seemingly get ahead of us, are the first words on our lips, "Listen, God! Listen! After all I have done for you..." Then we list reasons as to why He should bless us and why we should be treated better than others.

This is really creepy and dangerous and subtle. You know why? Because it has to do with control. We want to control God. We are subtly, unconsciously trying to control the Almighty God by saying, "Because I am good, because I have done good and followed the rules, You owe it to me, God, to treat me better."

That, my friends, is control.

There is an elder son in us that says, "I can control God by being good. If I follow the Heavenly Father's commands, He owes it to me. He has to, He is required to bless me."

And that is why when we even suffer a little pain, we whine. God owes us a better life. This is a dangerous form of manipulation. There is a part of us that wants to control God. We want to be the Lord and God to be our slave.

And the way we control Him is by being good. We tell ourselves, "If I am good, then God gives me what I want. He gives me the stuff I want." But friends, when we want just the blessings and the stuff, we don't really want God. Do we want a relationship with our Heavenly Father who acts on His own will for our good? Or a God we can manipulate? One whom we think owes us a good life because we are entitled to it after all we have done?

I mean what has He done for us lately, other than dying on a cross after being whipped, stabbed, and tortured? We start to think that that's nothing compared to what we have done, like helping old ladies cross the street and carry their heavy grocery bags.

Are we getting it now? The audacity of the elder brother in us all? When we try to be good, when we try to do devotionals, read the Bible, pray, or follow the Ten Commandments, honestly is there a part of us that thinks, "Now I will get the blessings and the things I want."

Rather than, "I do these things so I will know God and experience Him more. I will have an intimate relationship with the Father just as I have always wanted."

It's the relationship that counts, not the stuff that comes from the relationship. That's why worship is hard for some of us. It's because worship is about a relationship with God the Father. It's not about paying our dues to God every week so that we can get the stuff or the blessings.

Do we want God or the things that we can get from God? When things go wrong in our life, is there a voice in us that says, "After all I have done for You, God, You owe me a better life. You owe me blessings."

And this is when Christianity is no longer a relationship with God; it has become a controlled substance called religion. It's a religion that says, "I do good, and You owe me God. I control You. I do good, and like an ATM, I have hit the right buttons so you owe me a blessing. It means I should have less suffering than everyone else. In fact, it means I get two-thirds inheritance, and at the most those other sinful younger brothers should get one third, if even that."

Christianity is a relationship with God and not a religion of the best do-gooders get the most blessings.

Jesus always had the hardest time with those who made a faith in Him into a legalistic religion. Jesus didn't like religious people who thought this way.

This is really mind-blowing for many people. And so Christianity is often hard to handle, hard to control. It's a new breed. We are so geared toward religious behavior and following rules that we think that can control God.

Religious people don't like sinners. The Pharisees in the Bible don't like sinners. They can't figure out why Jesus likes to hang out with people who don't follow the rules. In fact, they don't even like it when the lost return to God, as in this parable. Why should we party for a lost son who is found by God? It is not good when we become like the Pharisees.

True story. A woman once said to me, "Dan, I come to church every Sunday. But to be honest, I have never been in a church where there have been so many non-Christians attending. It makes me uncomfortable sitting next to so many of them."

First of all, how do you know they are not Christians? Second, even if

they are non-Christians, isn't that what church is about? Don't we want to attract all people, especially those who are not Christians?

This woman eventually left the church. Most religious, legalistic people do leave this church.

If you don't like being with non-Christians, let me ask you: "Is that older brother talk? I think it is."

Why should these non-Christian people be here? But Jesus said He loved the irreligious. He hung out with them. And that is why I love it that there are a lot of people here who are not Christians for they are people like the rest of us who are trying to figure out life and how Jesus is the only thing that makes sense in this crazy world.

There is an elder brother in us all that says, "Listen, God. For all these years I have been working like a slave for You, and I have never disobeyed your commands like your younger son has."

The fact is, as Tim Keller says, the elder brother doesn't know the difference between sins and Sin. In the elder brother's mind, there is a list of sins that he has never committed. He has obeyed God's commands and so he has checked off all of the sins he never committed. In his mind he is sinless.

This is as opposed to "Sin" with a capital "S." We all have Sin. Our human nature is tainted by Sin in all areas. We want to be like God. We are self-centered, we are controlling, and we tend to be judgmental of others. It is that sinful nature that we must repent of. Not so much sins, but Sin.

You know what happens when we think we are all so good in being so law-abiding? We start looking down on other people. We think we are better than they because they commit sins, or at least more sins than we do. That

means we have a better scorecard than they do, and so we should get the fatted calf.

It also means that we not only judge and look down on people but we also even make them worse than they really are. What does the elder son say about his younger brother?

Luke 15:30 "But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Wait a minute! Back up. Did you catch that? Who said the younger son was involved with prostitutes? That is new information and probably just ruinous accusation and a rumor that the elder son has now INSERTED into the story to make a greater case of how bad the younger son is and how good he, the elder son, is.

When we replay scenes in our minds (or when telling others about them) with someone we are angry at, we often add more data to what really happened, which makes that person more evil than he or she really is. Right?

When we tell our friends about some infraction done to us, we tend to exaggerate and add more to what really happened. We do that, too, when we are judging ourselves as morally clean and someone else as morally corrupt.

Notice also what the older son says, in verse 30: "But when this son of yours came back..." He doesn't say "my brother;" he says, "when this son of yours," which makes it even more contemptuous.

But then the Father said to the older son, in v 31: "*Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.*" This is the key line for the whole passage. The Father, who represents God, uses the most intimate term: son.

He says, "All that is mine is yours. I am always with you."

He is saying, "Son, you are so worried about the fatted calves of life that you have become blind to all the other things I have given you. Everything I have, I am giving to you. You complain about the fatted calf you never had, but you have forgotten all the things you have gotten from me. And in the end, I withhold nothing from you. I offer you my relationship. I am with you always, but you try to be YOUR OWN savior.

And here is the really peculiar part, but it is devastating if you grab hold of this. The elder son is trying to be his own savior. If he truly believes that he has done all that has been commanded, then by avoiding sin, he doesn't need a savior. He has saved himself by following the rules.

That is religion and not Christianity. Jesus keeps trying to tell us, "Don't make me a religion by following just rules and regulations. I don't like religious people who think that if they follow the rituals and the rules they are saved. These people don't know me. It's about a relationship, not rules. I want you to know Me, trust Me, love me and experience My love. You can't save yourself. You can't even follow all the rules you have made up."

Often there are people who think they are self-made men or women because of what they have accomplished. In essence they think they have saved themselves; they are their own savior and messiah. Can we learn to obey God because we love Him and not because if we obey then He owes us?

Jesus was giving this parable not only to the general public but also to the Pharisees who were in the audience. They were the people who

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made up the religious rules of the day. Their rules had nothing to do with knowing God in a personal way.

Many who attend church today think it's just about rules. But let me tell you today that it is about a relationship with God.

When 32 people responded and came forward to the altar last week, they began a journey of a relationship with God. It wasn't about rules.

So you ask, "Then how can we be saved? How can we younger or elder brothers be saved?" I like what author and pastor Tim Keller says about this, and I'd like to make them my last points for this sermon.

First, we all need the initiating love of God the Father. God the Father always makes the first move. He runs down the road to meet the returning son. He leaves the party to reconcile with the older son. He makes the first move of always seeking us out, waiting for us to repent.

Second, we need to repent of the things that are not on "the list."

As Keller says, the older son said he has obeyed everything on the list, his list of what acts of sins are. The fact is, there are things we need to repent of that are not on our list: our pride, our laziness, our judgmental attitude, our lack of gratitude, our whining, our poor-me attitude, our lack of loving the unlovable.

Third, realize the cost of the father to bring us all home.

The younger son originally never fully appreciated all of the riches in the inheritance that the father gave him. The older son never fully appreciated that the father was going to give the older son the rest of his property.

In that sense, the older brother in the end will inherit every robe in the closet. And the younger son

cannot have any of the robes unless the older son gives the younger brother one of HIS robes.

If the elder brother really loved his father, if he really saw the pain and the agony of his father over the rebelliousness of the younger son, if he really had a love for his younger brother, he would have said, "Father, let me go down into town and find my wayward brother. And if he truly has lost himself, truly ruined and wrecked his life, I will spare no expense to bring him home."

That's what Jesus did. Jesus, the Son of The Heavenly Father, came down from heaven to find us and bring us home to God. He spared no expense to do that.

Notice this. All throughout Gospel of Luke, Jesus used the term "Father" to address God the Father:

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Luke 22:42

"Father forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)

"Father into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

But when He got to the cross, all that changed.

"My God My God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark 15:34

At that moment on the cross, He wasn't God's Son. He took on all of our sin and died in our place so that one day WE WOULD be God's sons and daughters.

He gave it all up for a moment on the cross. He gave it all that we might be saved and experience the joy and the wonder when God celebrates our return and kills the fatted calf.