

Give Me Mine
Luke 15
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Last week we began an in-depth look at a story Jesus told the Pharisees in response to their grumblings and criticisms about who Jesus was hanging out with. We said that the particular hermeneutic, or lens, that we are using to study this parable is one of community—how it is broken and how it is restored. Jesus’ story begins with a short but shocking request that blows the notion of community all to smithereens. The younger son goes to his father and says, “Give me my share of your estate.”

To understand how offensive this request by the younger son is, it’s important to know something about the inheritance laws of the time. This was a culture in which when a father died, the oldest son received a double portion of what the other heirs inherited. If a father had two heirs, as is the case in our story, the eldest son would get 2/3 of the estate and the younger son 1/3. So, it isn’t unreasonable for the younger son to expect to receive a portion of his father’s wealth. Where the son is grossly out of line, however, is in asking for that portion before his father’s death. This was akin to saying to the father, “I want you dead. I want your money, but I don’t want you, so give me what’s coming to me. Give me what’s mine.”

This request doesn’t just blow up the relationship between father and son, as tragic as that is; its consequences are much more far-reaching. The extraordinary disrespect towards the father disgraces the family name throughout the entire community. It is a severe humiliation foisted upon the father through the son’s disdain and contempt. It is also a serious economic assault. There is no bank from which the father can make a withdrawal from his liquid assets. In order to comply with the son’s request, the father would have to sell part of his land or herds, which are the foundation upon which the family’s economic stability is based. The son’s request is, therefore, a relational and economic act of violence against the family’s integrity. In short, it rips the family apart.

As impudent and shocking as the younger son’s request is, the father’s response would have been even more startling to Jesus’ 1st century listeners. What the father should have done given the circumstances, and what Jesus’ audience expected to happen, is for the father to slap his son across the face, chase him from

the family compound and disown him. But the father doesn't do anything like that. We're told he simply "divides his property between them." The Greek word translated as "property" in this verse is an unusual word. It is the word "*bios*" which literally means "life." What the text is telling us is that the father divides his "life" between his two sons. Luke's word choice conveys the father's deep anguish over losing his land, the family's good name and status, and the presence of one of his sons. He is being asked to tear his very life apart—and he does.

Perhaps at this point we need to stop and ask a critical question: why would the younger son make such a request knowing what it would do to his father and his family? The answer to that question is at the core of what makes this story so heartbreaking. Simply put, the son was after his father's things, rather than the father himself. It wasn't a relationship with his father that the son valued; it was what he could get out of his father—the estate, the money, the inheritance. The son has lived with his father and maybe even obeyed his father, but he doesn't love his father. What he loves, ultimately, is his father's belongings, not the father himself. The son's heart is set on wealth and the comfort, freedom, and status that wealth brings. His father is just a means to achieving that end, and when the son grows impatient to get on with what is really important to him, he goes to his father and wishes him dead.

This is the very definition of what scripture calls idolatry. Idolatry is not a word we use in everyday conversation, but here we have a poignant, tragic, picture of it. Idolatry is having a heart set not on the Father, that is, our Heavenly Father, but on the *things* of the father. We want the blessings of belonging to God without having to have a real relationship with God. We want the love, the joy, the peace—all the good stuff that Jesus offers—but we want it on our terms and our terms do not include having to reckon with stuff like the idolatry that lurks in our hearts or the costly path of discipleship. We definitely don't want anything to do with having our motives and attitudes and real loves examined. Best to just make spirituality a private, inner affair; not something that will place any real demands on us or question what's most deeply hidden in our hearts.

We know all about the younger brother's idolatry. It's usually the focus of this parable, the reason it's called The Parable of the Prodigal Son. But in a completely unexpected twist Jesus exposes the elder brother's idolatry as well. On the surface the two brothers look very different. One runs off to indulge himself in immoral living. The other stays home and faithfully and obediently serves his father.

But on the greatest day of the father's life, when his youngest son, who was lost, returns home, the elder son humiliates and shames the father just as publicly as his younger brother had done. He refuses to come in and join the lavish party, likely the biggest feast and community event his father has ever put on. The elder son remains outside the door, publicly casting a vote of "no-confidence" in his father's actions which forces the father to leave his guests to go outside and plead with his son—a demeaning thing for him to do. The son continues to insult his father by addressing him with a 1st century version of, "hey you, look here!" This is blatantly disrespectful behavior, tumbling out of the eldest son in his fury.

But fury over what? What has so gotten into this son's craw? It may help us to understand his reaction to know that to kill the fatted calf was a rare and extravagant gesture. This wasn't just a "welcome home" family meal. The fatted calf would have served 75-100 people. The father has pulled out all the stops and prepared a feast to which the entire community would have been invited. So, the house is brimming with guests—with the eldest son's very notable exception.

And there's one other critical detail that shouldn't be missed. The younger son has already received his share of the father's inheritance. Everything that is left would eventually be inherited by his older brother. So when the father says to his eldest offspring, "everything I have is yours," he is telling the literal truth. And that means that the one who is really footing the bill for this community bash is the elder brother. And that's not even the worst of it. By reinstating the younger son as a member of the family, that means he has been made an heir again, entitling him to one-third of their (now very diminished) family wealth. This is unconscionable to the elder brother. You can almost hear his unspoken "It's not fair!" being shouted to the rooftops.

But do you see what we just learned about the oldest son? He has exposed the truth of what is really in his own heart, and it is no different from his younger brother. He, too, isn't interested in a relationship with the father but in what he can get out of that relationship. Yes, he stayed home and was obedient to the father, but not out of love, or he would never have shamed his father and publicly humiliated him the way he did. No, like his younger brother, his heart is set not on the relationship but on his father's things, on the inheritance and the money, which makes him unable and unwilling to share in his father's joy. The younger brother's idolatry showed itself in his wild and immoral living. The elder brother's idolatry shows itself in his anger and self-righteousness.

This is not a foreign experience to us. It is sadly all too common in the church to find people who are happy to embrace the love, peace and joy that comes with following Jesus, but God is the first one to get the blame when something goes wrong. The attitude seems to be, “I signed up for some blessing; now, where is it?” Somehow the joy of belonging to Christ as beloved sons and daughters has gotten divorced from what that entails. Yes, there is love, peace and joy that come with following Jesus, but there is also a cost to discipleship. Christians don’t get a free pass on the difficulties and hardships of this life, and if that’s what we’re after, it is inevitable that we will become as incensed with God as the elder brother is with his father. The joy of the life of faith is found in a daily, loving relationship with God, not in what we can get out of God.

Idolatry always destroys community, and we all have an idolatry problem. That is true whether we are the free-wheeling, “younger brother” types or the moral, upstanding “elder brother” types. Because the younger brother’s idolatry is more obvious, the irony is that seeing and owning one’s idolatry is often hardest for those who obey all the rules. St. Augustine, in his famous Confessions, used the term “disordered loves” to talk about idolatry. All disordered loves lead to brokenness in our own lives and in our families and communities because we take a good thing and make it into an ultimate thing. Food is good, sex is good, work is good, family is good, having a good reputation is good, but when any of these becomes an ultimate goal, an ultimate desire, that thing which our heart most deeply longs for, it has become a disordered love, an idol. And here’s the thing about idols—they can never, ever live up to what we’re asking of them.

Disordered loves promise us the moon. They promise that if we have this many dollars in the bank or we can wear this particular size or we win this award or get this degree or take this trip, or marry that certain person—once we realize that dream, whatever it is, we will be happy. We’ll be content. We will finally have arrived and therefore, life will be great. But it’s a lie. Disordered loves only leave us empty and unsatisfied, emotionally starved and enslaved. And they are bound to do that because we are made for relationship, relationship with our Creator. Only God can meet our deepest needs and satisfy our ultimate longings.

I said when we began this series that each week we would ask the same question of this story: what does this parable say about how grace forms us into a unique human community? Based on what we’ve learned today, we are a unique community first, as we recognize our own idolatry, confess it, and do something about it. Second, we are a unique community when we pursue a relationship with God and each other for relationship’s sake, rather than because of what we can

gain from it. These kinds of relationships will be rooted in the desire to intimately know God and one another, to love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven, to grow and serve together.

By his extraordinary actions the father left open the possibility of reconciliation and restoration with both of his sons, which is, of course, a picture of what God does for us. God's desire is always for us to be home with God. Even if the smell of the pigpen is still on us, the Father's arms are open, and God is running towards us in welcome. Even if we are still fuming in our anger, God is leaving the star-studded guests at the party to come find us and plead with us to join the celebration. We have a choice to make. How will we respond to the grace being offered us?