

Big Brother Attitudes: Luke 15 vs 1-3 and 23-31. 10th July 2021

This morning we are looking at the parable of the prodigal son with particular emphasis on the older brother. It's a parable we are all familiar with. Or are we? Some say it's an illustration of the Gospel – the Gospel within the Gospel. There is no doubt the parable presents a powerful image of the forgiveness of God. It also paints a beautiful picture of the return of the prodigal that echoes a Christian's conversion: from spiritual death to spiritual life. V2 “ he was lost and is found.” Literally, he was perished and is saved.

What's the main purpose for Jesus telling this parable? V2 tells us he was talking to tax collectors and Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Jesus attracted sinners whereas the Pharisees turned them off with all their rules and regulations. Though Jesus didn't compromise on his message to attract them, he showed by his actions that he really cared for them. He understood their needs, their lostness, and he tried to help them. The Pharisees criticised them, kept them at arms' length. They prized their piety and purity above love for lost souls. All they saw was Jesus receiving and forgiving irreligious people. They muttered and rebelled against him. V2 “ This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So, Jesus responds by telling the parable and in it contrasts the loving and forgiving nature of God with the Pharisees' loveless exclusiveness. It's not difficult so see how sinners in the crowd would identify with the prodigal and thereby receive Jesus – the Son of man who came to seek and save what was lost. I also identify with the prodigal.

I left home spiritually at 13 when my stepmother died and after 30 odd years ended up in a pig-pen of my own making and at the end of my tether. But like the prodigal, who came to his senses, made his way home, confessed his sins and begged for forgiveness: I too found a gracious Father waiting, who forgave my past and reinstated me as one of His family. Jn.1v12. “Yet to all who received him to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.” I can now look in the mirror, because all that indescribable guilt has gone. Ro.8v1 “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Jesus concludes the parable challenging the Pharisees in the crowd. He challenges their pride: pride in their good works, keeping of God's Law, their piety. They believed they were entitled to God's blessing and eternal life itself. They would have rejected any possibility of any prodigal being forgiven. They nothing of God's grace in saving lost souls. So, Jesus rebukes them through the attitude, actions and words of the elder brother in the parable. Big brother's attitude stinks worse than a pig-pen. We see in him: pride jealousy, anger, resentment, malice, unforgiveness, judgmentalism, self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-promotion. That attitude betrays his lack of intimacy, lack of empathy with, and understanding of his father. Note! When big brother came home from the fields, he didn't speak to his father personally but inquired from a servant what was occurring. When his father comes out to coax him into the celebration, he subjects his father to a rant. In reality he was just as far from the father as the unrepentant prodigal had been! Here's a summary of the contrasting actions of the father and the big brother.

Father: always on the look out for his lost son. Ran to him when he first saw him. Received him with forgiveness. Full of joy at his return. Celebrated.

Big brother: too busy looking after his own interests. Refused to meet his brother. Disowned him, “This son of yours” not “my brother.” Casts up his recent past. Angry at the prodigal’s return. Sulks outside.

The parable ends with the father’s gracious love in view. He loves his older sulky son with the bad attitude, just as much as his younger wild one. V31 “ my son you are always with me and everything I have is yours. Literally, you won’t suffer any detriment because of my generosity to your brother. The story is left hanging there. Will big brother come to his senses, respond to his father’s love, repent of his bad attitude and join the party? In a sense Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, “ over to you. How do you want the story to end?” “Will you come to me and join the sinners or exclude yourselves with your hard-hearted attitudes?” Sadly, with hindsight we know most did not take up the offer. So, what is big brother saying to me today? About 20 years ago, I began my Christian journey. Like all journeys, there are good days, bad days and on occasions very bad days. But, for sure the worst days in Christ is infinitely better than the best day in the world. Sometimes you can go days, weeks, months without losing your way, losing your temper or giving into temptation. You look in the mirror and think I’m really getting there. But even the smallest of events can burst that illusion. Before, I became a Christian, I had a real potty mouth. I mistakenly thought swearing was a thing of the past for me until I accidentally hit my thumb hammering in a picture hook. But there’s more. 2Cor.7v1 “ Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” The sins of the flesh, like the bad behaviour of the prodigal are clearly visible to us and others and consequently can be addressed readily in the power of the Holy Spirit. However, sins of the spirit like the bad attitude of big brother may not be visible to others and can lie hidden and dormant and deep within ourselves until triggered and then our words give them away. Big brother was a solid citizen. He worked hard, obeyed his dad and didn’t bring disgrace on either his family or his neighbours. Yet, all it took was the sound of dancing and music and news of the prodigal’s return for big brother to explode and all that pent u bile to pour out.

A few weeks ago, Bishop Harold Miller was speaking at a DHM healing service in East Belfast. He said that we are all the elder son, always with the Father or at least, it looks as if we are. The elder son was proximate to the father but not intimate with him. That really struck a chord with me. I had been congratulating myself that over the past 20 years, there have been no major temptations to revert to my old prodigal ways. Yet had I been slowly morphing into the older brother: nursing an unforgiving spirit, condemnatory attitudes, becoming self- righteous. Had I forgotten Eph.2v8. And with those attitudes was I losing intimacy with my heavenly Father. 1Jn.4v16 “God is love. Whoever lives in love live in God and God in him.

The story of the elder son is a clear warning to us all that we can all sit prim and proper in our pews content in our godliness until the right circumstances come along and reveal to us who we really are. Let me give you a personal example. A long time ago when Will McCallion and I both had a lot more hair. It was a time of black boards, the Black and White Minstrel’s’ TV show etc. I never imagined or considered myself remotely racist. I’ve worked with all sorts of folk during my working life and I have a Taiwanese stepmother and stepbrother and mixed- race half-sister. But during lockdown and the rise of the BLM and

BAME movements, I experienced a lot of unexpected anger and unsavoury thoughts. I convinced myself that as long as I didn't voice them, I'm okay. But RT Kendall says God hears them and the angels blush! During that time, I was reading Revelation and 5v9 struck me. "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God, from every tribe, and language, and people and nation." Christians must be colour blind. Thankfully we have the promise that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. I've been praying a lot about this and will keep praying until I've Shalom with my Father God. Shalom is more than peace: it's nothing missing, nothing broken, everything restored.

Let me finish with a couple of scriptures for us all to think about.

Lk6v37. Do not judge and you will not be judged, do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.

Ph2v5 Your attitude (note: not your behaviour) should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

If your attitude is right good behaviour follows.

Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head. Then Paul sets a good example. He took some bread, gave thanks to the Lord for the food and for His assurance of their safety, broke it and began to eat. Paul's actions underscored his belief that they would reach dry land soon and be saved. Paul's faith is contagious. V36 They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. They exercised even more faith by throwing the excess food overboard to further lighten the ship. God's promises to Paul came to pass. V44 Everyone reached land in safety. So, are you a person of faith like Paul, anchored in Christ alone, standing on the promises of despair, anchorless, without hope and tossed about by the storms of this life? If you are a person of faith, are you an encourager like Paul? Do you pray with and for people who have lost hope? Do you share God's promises from his word and back it up with practical help? Can you help with baby basics, the foodbank, the heating and lighting scheme, school uniforms, the Co-op giveaway and CAP. But above all are you setting a good example? Do you smile in the teeth of life's storms? Remember the children's chorus. "with Jesus in the boat, you can smile in the storm, smile in the storm....." As believers we should be able to smile in the storm, because we are Easter people and resurrection people. We know where our ultimate home is and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God and reaching that final destination to be with Him. How you face life's storms has a major impact on how nonbelievers perceive the word of God and your professed faith. People need to hear the gospel message, absolutely. But actually, seeing how the good news has personally impacted you and how you carry yourself through life's storms will do more to spark and encourage their faith than anything else. Finally, if you haven't yet invited Jesus into your boat, into your life, I would earnestly encourage you to do so now. Then you will know his peace – no matter what the circumstances. That peace that transcends all understanding. Amen.