

The Good and Beautiful God: God is Love

May 29, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

15:1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

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¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹ "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Pastor Jeff Gannon was sitting in his office one afternoon when the phone rang. The young woman on the phone said, "I just have one question. May I come to your church?"

Jeff was stunned by the question. "Can you come to our church? Of course you can. Why would you even feel the need to ask such a question?" he asked.

"Let me tell you my story before you answer," she said.

The young woman went on to tell him that when she was a junior in high school she got pregnant by a young man who had no interest in her or the baby she was carrying. She decided not to get an abortion and, after some soul searching, began to feel the need to get her life in order. She went back to the church she had gone to when she was a young girl, and started to feel that she was on the right track.

After a few months of attending church she thought that other girls might benefit from her mistakes, so she asked the pastor if she could speak to the middle-aged girls about the pressures of dating and sex. The pastor said to her, "No, I would never allow that. I am afraid that your type of person might rub off on them." Though she felt rejected, she also felt at home in that church, so she kept attending. A few months after her baby was born, she called the pastor to schedule a Sunday on which she could have her baby baptized. The pastor said, "That is not going to happen in my church. I would never baptize an illegitimate baby."

"Now that you know my story," she said to Jeff, "can I still come to your church?"¹

Before you either get mad at that story, which is true by the way, or merely pass it off with a tsk-tsk, consider that people being judged in such a way that they feel unwelcome to come to church is not a very uncommon problem. As pastor of this church, I know of a number of situations of people who are sitting in this worship space with you right now who have nearly been driven away permanently from the church because of how they had been treated. Some

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, pp. 93-94.

have returned to church only after a long time of being away, just to see if this church will be accepting of them or not.

One of the things about that story that first sticks out to me is that people have a tendency to think of church as “my” church or as “your” church, when in reality it is God’s church. And if God wanted to keep all the people out of His church who ever committed a sin then – guess what? – none of us would be sitting here right now.

That young woman who asked about whether or not she would be welcome in God’s church where Jeff was a pastor, was welcomed to the church where her child was baptized. The woman ended up working with young people, finished her education and eventually went into mission work. She and her daughter live and work as missionaries in Africa.² God was able to do some wonderful ministry through her which otherwise never would have happened had she not been welcomed into the church despite her troubled past.

Many people base their perception of God on performance-based acceptance. “Our parents begin molding and shaping our behavior from a very early age. Some of the first words we learn are *good* and *bad*. We hear things like ‘Oh, you ate all of your peas—*good* girl’ or ‘Do not write on the wall with your crayon—*bad* boy.’ Before we can speak, we become aware that acceptance hinges on our behavior, which produces a decidedly unstable world of highly conditional love. ...Part of this is necessary because a parent’s job is to teach right from wrong; the difficulty is making it clear to [our] children that their actions and not their identity is being evaluated.”³

I have found that our society today really struggles with drawing the line between judging people’s actions and judging people’s identity. I have had people challenge me when I pointed out someone’s behavior which I deemed inappropriate. I have been confronted with: “You mean that you don’t love them?” Folks, I can tell you, that as a parent, I did not always agree with the behavior of my children. Did I stop loving them as a result of it? No way! Did I still feel the need to correct them? Yes, indeed. Far from that being a demonstration that I no longer loved them, correcting them is a way to show them how much I do love them. I love them enough that I did not want them to come to any harm as a consequence of their inappropriate behavior!

Jesus told a parable about loving a child who was behaving inappropriately. It is often referred to as the parable of the prodigal son, but it should be called the parable of the loving father. The focus of the story was not so much about the inappropriate behavior of the younger, prodigal son but on the loving father, who continues to love both sons, the wayward one and the unreasonably judgmental one, even though both were bad to the bone. After all, this parable was taught as a response to the religious leaders, the Pharisees, who were pointing fingers of judgment against Jesus for daring to associate with sinners (Luke 15:1-2).

² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

This parable is so familiar to most Christians that we may miss some of the more shocking parts of the story. When the younger son asks for his inheritance, that was a stunning and disrespectful request. Not only would the father be insulted, he was essentially being treated as though he was already dead. A typical father might have gotten angry and thrown the child out of the house with no source of income whatsoever. In Jesus' day, the father had the right to have his son stoned to death for such a vile request.

Then, after the son is allowed to leave, the son squanders his inheritance on reckless living. Then when he decides to return to beg the father's acceptance, the parable takes another shocking turn. The father apparently was watching to see if his son would return. When he sees him at a distance, the father runs out to greet him. In the culture where Jesus was telling this parable, no self-respecting father would run to see his son, especially one who had misbehaved. "In the first century, ...a Middle Eastern man never — never — ran. If he were to run, he would have to hitch up his tunic so he would not trip. If he did this, it would show his bare legs. In that culture, it was humiliating and shameful for a man to show his bare legs."⁴ And then, the loving father goes so far as to give the undeserving son a welcome home that restores him to the family. He gives him the best robe, a family ring on his finger, and prepares a feast with all the best available.

God, it appears, is very fond of sinners. Not their sin. The father was obviously grieved over his son's decisions; he neither endorsed nor overlooked the son's reckless living. Any good father would be rightly upset by the actions of the younger son. But Jesus wants us to understand that even the worst of our sins will not prevent God from loving us or stop God from longing for our return. The parable is not so much about a sinner being saved as it is about a God who loves even those who sin against him.⁵

Then comes the most shocking part of the parable. This second part was why Jesus told the parable, so that the self-righteous, judgmental religious leaders would realize the error of their ways. "This parable was not directed to the downtrodden and marginalized as much as it was to the upright and pious who could not accept the radical message of God's unconditional love. The character of the elder brother represents those of us who chafe at the idea of God loving sinners. The elder brother represents the part of us that is not comfortable with God's unconditional love for others or even ourselves."⁶

Most of us identify more with the elder brother in the story than we care to admit. It doesn't seem fair that the elder son was a good boy the whole time the prodigal son was away being a bad boy, and then it was the bad boy who gets the party thrown for him.

"Jesus is striking at the heart of the problem we have with grace: we don't like it. It seems unfair, but in reality it is perfectly fair. God is gracious to all. It smacks against our performance-based-acceptance narrative. The chief point is ...it is not my sin that moves me away from God, it is my refusal of grace, both for myself and for others. The father tells the older son that the return of

⁴ <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/biola-magazine/2010/the-prodigal-sons-father-shouldnt-have-run>

⁵ James Bryan Smith, p. 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

his younger son is cause for celebration and rejoicing. Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, essentially saying, 'When you see the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the other known sinners coming to me, you should rejoice—they were dead and are now alive.'⁷

God loves others with unconditional love. God loves you with unconditional love. That doesn't mean that he approves of your sin. He doesn't. But it does mean that he approves of you as a person who is made in his image. If you have ever felt rejected and unwelcome, come home to our loving and welcoming God. He is a good and beautiful God who desires to embrace you with His unconditional love.

⁷ Ibid., p. 102.