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Living in HisStory: Revealing the True Wonder of Who God Is
The Father Heart of God
Luke 15:11-32
June 17, 2018, Jeff Germs

This is our last sermon in this series for a while. We are going to take a break until our launch Sunday in September. Starting next week we have some amazing speakers lined up to dig into Hebrews 11. We are going to delve into each of the heroes of faith that the writer lists and see the bigger picture of what God is doing. What we are going to see very clearly, like every sermon in this current series, is that Jesus is actually the hero in each of the stories.

Today we are going to look at one of the parables of Jesus that we dug deep into previously. Four years ago we did a sermon series looking at what is normally called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We looked at the two sons: the younger one, who took an early inheritance, left his family and squandered it all in reckless living; and the older son, who seemingly did everything right, but his heart was hard and distant from his father. The parable is really about two wrong ways of relating to God. Jesus doesn't give us the right answer in his parable. He leaves us hanging to wrestle with what the right way might be.

On the one hand, you have the younger son who thought that he could do whatever he wanted without consequence, and the father should turn a blind eye, he thought, and bless him simply because he is gracious. On the other hand, you have his elder brother who thought he could earn his father's blessing by living his life by a certain formula. "If I obey my father, live a morally upright life, manage my sin and my behaviour, my father will be pleased and give me a good life. He will be indebted to me."

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The former way is **antinomianism**, which says that I can do whatever I want without consequence because God is a God of grace.

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The latter is **legalism**, which says I must obey the strict letter of the law in order to merit God's favour. I work my way into God's love, favour, and acceptance by managing my sin, by making sure I don't do bad things and being certain to do other good things.

Neither way is how God intends for us to relate to him. Both ways, in fact, bypass relationship with God and ultimately lead to death.

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So, the question for us this morning is **how does God intend for us to relate to him?** What does a healthy relationship with our heavenly Father look like?

That's what I want us to look at this morning. We'll touch on the two sons again, but mostly I want to look at the father. This parable is really about the heart of the father. What was he like? The main question this parable poses is how does God, the Father, view us, and how does he want us to relate to him?

When we studied Galatians I made a bold statement that I want to make again. You may or may not agree with me. That's okay. I do believe it is true though.

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Everything that's wrong in the world today, all the sin, the corruption, the pain, all the broken relationships, every bad thing, has its root in bad theology. That is, false ideas about who God is.

It started with the fall of humanity when Adam and Eve first sinned because they didn't believe that God would do what he said he would do. And it continues today. We struggle with sin, fear, poor self-

image, inferiority and superiority complexes, hatred, envy, jealousy, and the list goes on and on, because we have false ideas of who God is, inside and outside the church.

Let me start off by saying that key to understanding this parable is understanding Paul's letter to the Galatians. We took an in-depth look at Galatians three and a half years ago. Paul sums up the gist of his letter in Galatians 4:1-7.

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Galatians 4:1-7 (NLT)

¹ Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves an inheritance for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. ² They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set. ³ And that's the way it was with us before Christ came. We were like children; we were slaves to the basic spiritual principles of this world.

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⁴ But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. ⁵ God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. ⁶ And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

Think about it. If we think we are to relate to God through the law, what will our relationship with God be like? It will be like a slave/master relationship. We would go about our lives dutifully keeping God's law so we remain in his favour, in order to avoid his wrath. Do you think that is the kind of relationship God wants us to have with him? Absolutely not! He is our perfect, loving Father. We are his children that he adores.

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1 John 3:1a (NLT)

¹ See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!

This is how God, our Father, wants us to relate to him, and that is the message of the parable we are going to dig into this morning.

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We're going to read this parable of Jesus' in its entirety. As we do, think about how the father in the parable relates to each of the sons and what his heart is for each of them. Before we read it let me just remind you of the setting in which Jesus told this parable.

Jesus was sitting around with some of the less desirable people of society, teaching them about the Kingdom of God, and sharing a meal with them. The fact that Jesus was fellowshiping with 'sinners' is what prompted the Pharisees and teachers of the law to make some snide comments about Jesus.

The people he was eating with were **"the sinners and tax collectors,"** as Luke puts it. They were people that most Jewish society looked down on. The tax collectors were the most hated at that time because they were Jews hired by the Roman government to collect taxes from their own people. They would commonly take extra for themselves, making themselves rich at the expense of their own countrymen. These people had no friends, with the exception of other tax collectors, because they were hated so much. They were thought of as traitors.

So, not only was Jesus with the tax collectors, but Luke says that he was also with "sinners," people who were obviously sinful and they knew it – the prostitutes, drunks, and other people who were thought of as outcasts by the religious people.

There was another group that was kind of hunkering around on the periphery like vultures. They were the Pharisees and teachers of the law - the religious people. They were hanging around in the shadows because they would not sit with the kinds of people that Jesus was sitting with. And they certainly wouldn't have had a meal with them. That, to the Pharisees, would have been repugnant. They complained in Luke 15:2 that Jesus, as a respectable rabbi, should not be associating with these types of people. In response to their accusations Jesus told three parables. They were all about lost things.

In the first one he asked them to imagine that they had **100 sheep** and one of them wandered away and got lost. He asked, "Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine and search long and hard until you found the one? And when you found it wouldn't you celebrate and throw a party with all your friends?"

He then told a similar parable about a woman who had **10 silver coins**. She lost one of them. Jesus asked them, ***"Wouldn't she sweep the whole house clean and search long and hard for the coin until she found it, and when she does celebrate with her friends?"***

After Jesus told the preceding parables he continued with the **Parable of the Two Lost Sons**. All three parables had the same message. All were meant to enliven the hard, dead religious hearts of the Pharisees and show how much God, the Father, values his lost children.

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Luke 15:11–32 (NLT)

¹¹ "A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. ¹³ "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve.

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¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."

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²⁰ "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' ²² "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.

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²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began. ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

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²⁸ "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹ but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my

friends. ³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!

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³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’ ”

I think this is my favourite parable of Jesus’. More than any other parable it gets to the heart of the Good News of Jesus and what God is looking for in relationship with us. I said earlier that we have some false notions about who God is, and these false notions keep us from enjoying God in the way he intended for us to enjoy him. Let’s take a look at those false beliefs that are brought out in the parable.

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I. I can find satisfaction outside of God

This was the false notion of the younger son, and the same lie Satan fed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In essence, the younger son said, “Dad, I want your blessing. I want to **use** you for my benefit. But, I don’t want **you** getting in the way of **my** plans. I know where I’m going. Give me all the good stuff I have coming to me. I want my inheritance **now**, and I want it all because **I** know what’s best for my life.”

So, the Father, gives his son his inheritance, knowing full well that he doesn’t have the maturity to handle it, but also knowing that he can’t force his son to love him. And the son, as we read the story, blows it all in riotous living and ends up destitute living with the pigs. I am sure that the religious Jews listening to Jesus would have recoiled in disgust when they heard about the pigs, because to the Jew, there was nothing lower than a pig, other than tax collectors and Samaritans. Jesus said that the son finally came to his senses and realized that he could not do his life without his father. The lesson is very clear. **There is no satisfaction outside of God.** I know.

This parable reminds me very much of my life. I went on a long search to try to find some kind of meaning for my existence. I was kicked out of school when I was 16. Most kids, if they get kicked out of school, would likely be devastated. And they should be. I wasn’t most kids. My only thought was that I had gained my freedom for the first time in my life.

I headed up to Northern BC and worked on the drilling rigs and partied hard. I thought I had freedom. I was making lots of money and spending it as fast as I got it until I found that pleasure in these things didn’t satisfy me for very long. And freedom, as I defined it, that is to do whatever I wanted on my own terms with no thought of consequence, was not in fact freedom, but bondage.

Several years later I thought that money, power and position was the way to find satisfaction so I started a business and became quite successful. I had several employees and was making lots of money, and had the respect of all my friends and family. I was on top of the world and I worked so hard to keep it all that I neglected Ruth, God and my other relationships. I became blind and my “empire” became my god. I always needed more because what I had never satisfied me. I ended up losing it all, and then God patiently and lovingly wooed me back to himself. And then finally it dawned on me, and I’m still learning this, **there is no satisfaction outside of God - none whatsoever.**

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There Is No Satisfaction Outside of God. Absolutely none, not power, or prestige, or money, or sex, or fame, or popularity, or education, or religion, or anything else that we try to replace God with. We were made for something higher. That’s why all of these things will leave us wanting. Remember Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman?

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John 4:13–14 (NLT)

¹³ Jesus replied, “Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. ¹⁴ But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.”

Jesus was saying that the things we try to satisfy ourselves with will fall flat and leave an empty hole. True, lasting satisfaction can only be found in relationship with God, through Jesus. And God loves us so much that he will do whatever it takes to bring us back home to him.

Here’s another false idea about God that keeps us from enjoying him.

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II. God is an angry slave-master/father

This is the false belief of the older son in the parable.

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‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.’

“All these years I’ve been slaving for you.” This is the opposite extreme as the first falsehood. The former belief said that “I can do it without God. I don’t need him. I can take all the **good things** God has for me and use them for my benefit and God will bless me because **he** is there for **me**.” I am the main character in my story.

The second false belief says “I have to do it all **for** God. And if I don’t, I will experience his wrath. God does not have my best in mind. He’s waiting for me to slip up so that he can bop me on the head.” But, the father never asked the older son to be a slave. He brought him into the world to be a son with all the benefits of sonship.

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‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.’

Everything I have is yours. You have been slaving all these years under a task master imposed by your own false beliefs. This is, actually, the idea that many Christians have of God. We think God is up there somewhere watching us, and he has a checklist on a clipboard, and if we don’t perform the right number of duties in the prescribed way he’s going to rap our knuckles with his yardstick. “Whatever I get from God I have to earn – even my salvation.”

Of course, as “good Baptists”, we would never say that. We know intellectually that salvation is by grace through faith, but often we don’t live it. We wonder, “Have I done enough for God? Have I gone to church enough and prayed enough, and read my Bible enough? Have I given enough? When is enough enough? When will God be satisfied with me so I can get off this legalistic treadmill?”

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So, we have two wrong ways of viewing God. Both ways try to manipulate God, but in different ways. One way says, “**I don’t need God’s love.** I want the benefits from God without the constraints of living life his way.” The other way says, “**I need to earn God’s love. God is an angry taskmaster that I should blindly obey in order to get his benefits.**” One way is libertinism, or antinomianism. The other is legalism. Neither way will lead us to a healthy relationship with our heavenly Father.

Well, if both of these beliefs are wrong, what is a healthy view of God? How should we relate to him? We tend to think that if there are two extremes at either end of a continuum of belief the truth must be somewhere balanced in the middle. And so we look for balance, or that sweet spot.

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But, if we are trying to find the balance on the tight rope walk between legalism and antinomianism we won't find a sweet spot. What we will find is that we will be at war within ourselves between two wrong extremes.

There is no sweet spot between the two. The truth is something totally other. On both sides of the continuum we find ourselves trying to live without God, and even pushing him away. And that's because we don't understand what God is really like. We have bad theology.

What is he like? Well, he's the one who seeks hard after the lost sheep & the lost coin and then celebrates when they are found.

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He is the Father who doesn't bully or force his children to do his will. He is the one who is pained when he sees his children choosing lifestyles and things he knows will hurt them.

He's the Father who goes out to the road every day waiting for his lost sons and daughters to realize that there is no satisfaction except in him. Did you notice that in the parable? The father noticed the younger son coming home when he was still a long way off. The picture here is of a father who is pained, actually, about the lost condition of his son and who every day goes to the road and looks out hoping and longing for his son to return. And then when he sees him a long way off, in his grace, runs towards him, and lovingly woos him back to his heart, with his kindness and grace, even though he has done nothing to deserve his love.

That's the kind of God we have. He's the one who gave up all of his godly attributes and became like us and lived the life that we should have lived, and died the death that we should have died so that we could have the life that we were created to have.

At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, the world watched as a parable of the father's love was played out on international television. As the gun sounded for the 400-meter race, Great Britain's Derek Redmond knew that his lifelong dream of winning the gold medal was in view. As he entered the back stretch, however, Redmond's dream was shattered by the ripping pain of a torn hamstring. He struggled to his feet in excruciating pain and began hopping toward the finish line. Suddenly Derek's father bounded out of the stands and pushed his way past a security guard.

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He threw his arms around his son. In a voice choked with emotion, he whispered, "Come on, Son, let's finish this together." Security tried to stop him, but he would have none of it. He was going to help his son finish the race. The crowd cheered and wept as they watched the father half-carrying his wounded son jerkily down the stretch and across the finish line.

That is what our heavenly father is like. He's not the heavy handed taskmaster who will punish us for failing. He is the one who comes alongside as we limp along and carries us across the finish line. That is what our God is like. And make no mistake, we all walk with a limp. We desperately need him.

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Matthew 11:28–30 (NLT)

28 Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

This doesn't sound like an angry taskmaster does it? I will give you rest. Let me teach you, because I am gentle and humble in heart. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. Isn't that great! This is what God wants to teach us. God created us to enjoy him forever. We cannot find satisfaction anywhere but

in God. He is not an angry taskmaster. His desire for us is that we would know his love and enjoy him forever. We learn from him by being in relationship with him through Jesus.

Like we said last week, there are some child-like ways we need to recover so we can enter into relationship with our Father-God, the way he intended for us way back in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of time. Through Jesus, he has restored our shalom. We just need to surrender to him and receive it and experience the love of our perfect Father.

The older son was not loving towards his younger brother. He thought he was doing everything to please his father, but he was missing something so very close to his father's heart, which was to love and search for and welcome his lost brother and celebrate him when he came home.

The problem with living our lives as if God is an angry taskmaster is that, we not only miss out on relationship with him as our loving Father, but we become angry ourselves and deal with others in the same way. Jesus is calling us to be like him, gentle, humble, kind and loving. He is inviting us to learn his ways from him.

A couple weeks ago we had our Freedom Session grad and fourteen people gave their testimonies of finding freedom in Jesus in various ways. I have asked if some would be willing to share their stories of freedom with us this morning.