

Message Notes: The Father's Heart

Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that God's ways and thoughts are far above ours. In Romans 11:33, Paul tells us that God's judgements are unsearchable and his paths beyond tracing out. Yet Peter tells us that grace and peace will be multiplied in our lives through the *epignosis* (deep, profound, transformative understanding) of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. How we develop this transformative understanding? I believe the answer is by meditating on the Father's heart.

Everything that is averse to us in life, in summary the world, the flesh and the devil, works with a commonality of purpose to distort and corrupt the belief that we hold inside concerning our Father's Heart, i.e., the character of God. I believe that even the most hardened atheist has a sense of the Father's Heart. Why else would they ask the question: 'if there really is a loving God, then why is there so much suffering?' Thus, they suppress this truth in their heart. I believe that even we in the Father's house bear some degree of distortion about the Father's Heart and therefore some degree of distortion in our own identity. The two sons in the parable are a good example of how distorted our viewpoint can be.

The younger son has seen the billboard advertisement of the world, the flesh and the devil – the one with the young man, sitting on the beach with a young woman, sipping wine under a fragrant tree listening to sweet music and watching the rolling waves. He wants to drain the cup of life's experiences to the dregs. He resents the boundaries that his Father has placed on his life. He wants to break free from his authority and live life large. The Father can see how paper thin the billboard is and how bitter the dregs really are, but he also knows that sometimes the most loving thing a Father can do is to allow his children to find out for themselves. And so, half naked, starving, dirty and in the company of pigs, his younger son learns a hard truth.

The older son also has a distorted, legalistic view of his father – a spirit of slavery. Straining and striving to 'earn' approval, his viewpoint has become warped. He has believed the devil's lies, that his father is harsh and demanding, a critical-spirited taskmaster – a slave driver. He has nursed those lies and brick-by-brick has built a stronghold in his heart where bitterness, resentment and self-pity now reside. He has a chip on his shoulder and a sense of entitlement. It does not occur to him that he has a place at the father's table, a place that does not belong to the servants, no matter how hard working or faithful they may be. It was not earned it is his by right of birth. Note: It is possible he has grown up under the oversight of trusted servants to ensure he learnt to carry responsibility.

In truth, this older son is immature. His father's words confirm this. My son (*teknon* in Greek), ... you are always with me and everything I have is yours (Luke 15:31). *Teknon* means child. Elsewhere in the parable, the standard term for son, *Huios* is used. I believe that the Holy Spirit, through Paul, provides further insight into this parable when in Galatians Paul writes: What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate (Gal 4:2). Paul goes on to contrast the immature spirit of slavery and a legalistic way of relating to God, with the spirit of mature sonship, that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, through whose sacrifice we are adopted

into the Father's family. It would seem that the 'older' son does not have access to the Father's resources because of his immature, selfish attitude.

As the story unfolds, we see that the younger son has a change of attitude, i.e., he repents. He has been disrespectful towards his father and wrong concerning the godly boundaries placed on his life. He returns home with a plan to 'man up' and apologise. While still a long way off, his father who has been watching and waiting, recognises him. He runs to his son with arms open wide, embraces him tightly, kisses him repeatedly despite his wretchedness and the stench of pigs. The son apologises but is interrupted before finishing his rehearsed speech.

The father orders his servants to place his best robe on his son (Isaiah 61:10), put sandals on his feet (contrast with Ex 3:5), and a ring on his finger. He then tells the servants to bring out the fatted calf. In my imagination this is a hand-reared calf, that walks beside its handlers and stands quietly while it was slain – a picture of our Lord who obediently went to the cross (John 14:31; John 13:1). It is apparent to the younger son that his forgiveness and acceptance as a mature son was not without cost. It required costly sacrifice.

In ancient times a signet ring represented authority, identity and the right to transact on behalf of the family patriarch. This 'grown-up' son, who now knows his father's heart, is established in his identity and has access to his father's resources. The evening is filled with great celebration, but what of the next day? Perhaps the young man is woken at 5am and told to arise. Does he resent this, or does he look at the signet ring and realise it is time to be about his father's business? I believe it is the latter. He knows his father's heart. He understands the reason for the boundaries that the father has placed on his life and also the reason for the responsibilities he carries and the work required of him. He rejects the enemy's lies with their implied 'victimhood'. He does not walk in self-pity. He uses his access to his father's resources wisely and generously to bless others. He knows that his acceptance as a mature son was very costly to his father.

Questions

1. "...the world, the flesh and the devil, work with a commonality of purpose to distort and corrupt the belief that we hold inside concerning our Father's Heart, i.e. the character of God." Do you agree with this statement? Can you share some ways that peoples' view or perception of God has been corrupted?
2. Prior to this parable, Jesus shared two similar parables: the lost sheep and the lost coin.
 - a. Have you ever had a wilderness experience when God felt distant, and you were in a dry, restless place?
 - b. Have you ever been so covered by the 'dust' of life that you felt unseen and without value?If you answered yes to either of those questions, how did God minister to you in that season?

3. As the saying goes, 'experience is a hard teacher'.
 - a. Have you ever gone out into the world, determined to drink from the cup of life's experiences, only to discover that the aftertaste was very bitter?
 - b. Have you been through the anguish of watching a loved one learn through painful experience?

If you answered yes to either question, and you are comfortable to do so, please share your experience.

4. Contrast the immature spirit of slavery and striving for approval with the mature spirit of sonship.
5. Do you agree with the statement: 'You cannot live as a victor if you identify as a victim?' Discuss.
6. As mature sons and daughters we have a signet ring granting us access to heaven's resources.
 - a. Why has our Heavenly Father granted us this access?
 - b. Are you using your access to heavenly resources? If yes, how?
7. Spend some time in prayer for each group member and for Rangeville CC that we will make full use of our signet rings to bless others and see many come into the Father's House.