

**~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:**

All three of the parables we've just read were aimed at the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling that Jesus was spending time with sinners. For that reason, what is commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son should really be referred to as the Parable of the Grumbling Older Brother.

Jesus did His best, using three stories, to convey the truth that saving sinners is a high priority on God's list. By expending His efforts to reach lost sinners, Jesus was doing nothing different than the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to search for one that is lost, or the woman who owns tens coins and focuses all her attention on finding one that was missing. Moreover, His priority was no different than heaven's priority, because there is "more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7). Imagine that! God, of course, loves those who serve Him, but He has more joy over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine saints!

If we are going to lay hold of Christ-likeness, we also must prioritize reaching out to the yet-unrepentant. How easy it is for churches to become inwardly-focused. It isn't easy for God to bless such churches, and they usually dry up or split up. Don't blame your pastor if your church has no outreach. Outreach is not supposed to be a church program, but a function of every individual member. Dead churches consist of dead members.

Let us not overlook the fact that Jesus did not say that heaven becomes excited over nonbelievers who "accept Jesus as their personal Savior." God is looking for repentance, as repentance opens the door to forgiveness and salvation. Heaven rejoices when sinners repent (15:7, 10).

Repentance is what was illustrated by the prodigal son. He "came to his senses" (15:7) and determined to humble himself, journey back to his father, confess his guilt, and ask for a job. Yet I've heard some modern preachers point out the father's "unconditional love" for his son, illustrated by his running to his son when he saw him from far off, and his embracing his son even prior to his confession. Yet I think it is safe to say that any such father, seeing his son returning in the distance, could discern that he was returning in repentance. How do you suppose the father would have reacted if his son had returned with his arms wrapped around two women, holding a bottle of wine in each hand, and saying, "Hey Pop, I've been having a lovely time with your money! Can me and my friends here kill the fattened calf and throw a little party?"

As I mentioned earlier, the third parable is more about the jealous older brother than it is about the prodigal son. Personally, I can kind of relate to that older brother. I'm not always as happy as I should be when God shows mercy to undeserving sinners, except, of course, when I happen to be the undeserving sinner to whom He is showing mercy! My fellow Pharisees and I really needed to hear this parable!

Keep in mind that this parable is imperfect in its analogy, as is every parable. That is, not every detail of the parable has some direct spiritual correlation. The relationship of the father and son does not perfectly and fully correlate to that of the unsaved and God. Before they repent and are born again, they were spiritually children of the devil, not of God. When they repent, they aren't returning to God, since they never served Him in the first place. Yet, when sinners repent, they are indeed showered with mercy and acceptance. Their creator then becomes their Father.

Finally, this story does not discount the fact that sin has its consequences or that God is fair. The younger brother was restored to his father, but his inheritance was gone forever. The father told his older son, "All that is mine is yours" (15:31). That means the older son's unflinching obedience would ultimately pay off as his full inheritance was still waiting for him. Yeah for fairness! (Too bad I need so much mercy.)