

**Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023**

**BROKEN BUT BELOVED – the Parable  
of a compassionate father**

**Scripture: Luke 15:11-32**



Many of us would have heard this parable which was the third in Jesus' response to the Pharisees' criticism of Him welcoming sinners. The real hero of the story is the father, as he openly welcomes his lost son back into the fold and he shows compassion to his older son's anger and judgement.

These events did not actually happen, but they hold deep and meaningful lessons for us. It reminds us of God's unfailing love, which is not based on anything we do or feel – it is based on His never-ending love.

In demanding his share of the family inheritance, the younger son was in effect saying – I wish you were dead, because inheritance was only paid once the father had died. You may think it strange, but the father granted his request.

For those who are parents you may have faced the same challenge – your son or daughter chooses a decision that you know is not right, but you let them do it, hoping they will learn for themselves the consequences of bad choices.

**The younger son:** The consequences of the younger son's choices was broken family relationships; becoming religiously unclean through living with pigs, as per Jewish law, loss of his inheritance and moral bankruptcy.

Imagine what it was like – no money, no food, no friends, treated as an outcast. He was broken and in the depths of despair. Very similar to those in our society who are homeless, hungry and begging for food and comfort.

He wanted his freedom and thought his life would be better away from the boundaries of his father, where he could choose what he wanted to do. He abandoned everything.

**Like God, the father gave his son ability to choose for himself. God does not always get in the way of our sinful desires. He also gives us free will.**

**But he “came to his senses”** which basically means he had a change of mind and probably a change of heart. He concluded that his father’s servants were better off, so he set off back home, not knowing what to expect.

**The oldest son:** like his younger brother, he was also broken. He believed that being loved is about being worthy. He had worked hard, trying to earn his father’s love, not realising that his diligent work made him no more loved than his brother.

He is critical and angry when his father holds a big feast for the return of his brother. He complained – I have slaved for years, obeyed you and you never let me have a party. Like the Pharisees, not everyone is happy about a person’s spiritual growth and return to God.

Both sons are distant from their father in different ways. Many today also live fractured lives, knowing neither unity within us nor having a close relationship with God.

The younger son felt that his home was a boundary stopping him from living his own life.

The older son was jealous and judgemental and said he didn't feel like he belonged to the inner circle.

Both the father's actions – running to greet his youngest son, and his words of understanding to his oldest son, was seeking to remove any boundaries.

**Conclusion:** Our identity is not in a far-off country; we are not prodigals or slaves. We are children of God and belong with Him. We may feel we have to earn God's love, just like the older son, but God's grace let's us be who we are supposed to be, even though we don't deserve to or may not want to.

God doesn't ask any of us to be perfect – look at the flawed heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 – God uses people with different struggles and issue to achieve His purposes.

As Christians and churchgoers, we need to avoid being like the older brother. If we believe that God's love should be earned by “correct” beliefs and actions, then we put up barriers which prevent people from reaching God, especially those who feel unworthy and unlovable.

This is the final sermon in our series of “Lifting the lid on Mental Health.” When it comes to healing there are big differences of belief both between and within our churches. And even the Bible shows us a mixed picture – some verses appear to offer us the power to pronounce complete healing while others suggest that suffering and pain will continue to be our reality.

This is a large topic, but here are some ideas for consideration:

Why do we pray?

Is it out of a desire to see suffering end? Don't forget that God can use our trials and suffering – He may have a purpose in allowing this challenging situation to continue.

Is our motivation in prayer to see the person become “normal?”

This means – to be more like us. This can lead to them feeling rejected and not acceptable until they are changed.

God longs to heal but doesn't promise medical cure.

The answer to a prayer for healing may be in renewed relationships, healthier self-esteem, or a change of heart, rather than a medical cure.

When praying for people it is vital that we don't give them more burdens by suggesting they need more faith, or they don't really want to be healed.

Today's passage shows that no matter how far we stray, or how unworthy we feel, or how ashamed we are, God is ready to welcome us with open arms.

As Christians our challenge is how do we present that love to those in our communities that may be struggling with mental health issues – issues that leave them feeling like outsiders, unworthy, embarrassed, or unlovable.

And when they do move towards God, how do we avoid being judgemental and critical like the older brother, instead of joining God in embracing and celebrating their return.

**Prayer – the Past does not define me.**

I will forget what lies behind and look forward to what lies ahead.

I will forget the former things and I will not dwell on the past.

God is doing a new thing in my life – I am a new creation.

The old has passed away, the new has come.

I will set aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and run towards Jesus.

I will forget my past sin and trust that You have removed it as far as the east is from the west.

I will let all bitterness, wrath and anger be put away from me.

I declare that the righteous keep moving forward and those with clean hearts become stronger and stronger.

I will let my eyes look straight ahead, fixing my gaze directly before me.

I receive freedom from my past, purpose in my present and hope for my future.

I will look up and ahead and not down and behind.

I will acknowledge Your presence before me, behind me and beside me.

I will not be afraid or discouraged for the Lord will personally go ahead of me.

He will be with me; He will neither fail me nor abandon me.

**And we declare this in the name of Jesus Christ Amen.**