

Sermon Luke 15:11-32

Forgiveness

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Last week I spoke to you about the fact that even though we are serious, spiritual Christians, we suffer from the common, human weakness that we often stumble and fall on the road with Jesus Christ. Our spiritual and moral goals are high, the moral compass points us in the right direction, but in spite of this, we seem unable to perfectly love God and our neighbor.

1 We need forgiveness

We, Christians, with all of our good intentions, are very imperfect in regard to God's commands. In plain biblical language, we are sinners. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves", the Apostle John writes in one of his letters.

The story of the prodigal gives us some insight into what sin means. It is our action, or our lack of action, that distances us from God our Father, from our brothers and sisters, and it even hurts ourselves.

The Prodigal Son asked for his inheritance - even though his father was still alive. So the father had to sell much of his land to someone outside the family. And the son sold it. That in itself was shameful in those days. Family-land was lost. And worse, it was as if the son said - I wished you were already dead. Give me my money now.

When we go against the desires of God, as expressed in the life and words of Jesus Christ, we practically tell God the Father and God the Son: we do not care about you. We act as if you do not exist.

How painful for the father in the Bible story: his son wounded his fatherly feelings and his pride. All the people in the village knew that the son badly mistreated his loving father.

And the father was so full of love, he did what he really should not have done: he actually gave the boy what he wanted.

When we sin, it is really a personal action against God. The one who loves us is torn apart by our so called liberty. But what sort of liberty is it, if it destroys our bond with God, if it messes up our own life, and if it damages our relationship with others? Is that freedom? Or is it nothing other than being shackled to our own stupidity and impulses?

But in spite of our the mess we create, God's love is greater. He is a forgiving God; that is his nature. Like a father who loves his children, he is waiting for us to come back to Him.

In the eyes of the other fathers in the village, the forgiving attitude of this father of the prodigal son must have been very annoying, to say it mildly. How can he show so much love to his son who publicly disgraced him! He should act as if his son did not exist. How can he continue to be so fond of this sinner. Next week all of our sons will want their inheritance!

The Greek gods had feelings and fun: they used people to play with, to tease. The god of Islam has no feelings, the far away god has no interest in us, except in our slavish obedience.

But our God is love. He IS love, so he can never stop loving you and I.

And he is also righteous. That combination of love and righteousness is puzzling of course, because how can a righteous God forgive those that he loves? A just God must demand satisfaction. A price must be paid for our sin.

The Gospel is, that Jesus Christ - God of God - paid the price for our disobedience. God saw his perfect life, and all the evil done to him, including his crucifixion.

One man lived and died perfectly. Because he was God as well, the impact of this perfect life and death was cosmic.

Anyone who believes in Jesus Christ, is embraced by him. When Adam had sinned, he tried to hide behind a tree. That was not very successful. We, sinners, we hide behind the tree of Christ, and this makes all things well between God and us. God freely forgives all who come to him through Jesus.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

2 Forgiveness is a means, not an end

The prodigal son could not believe in such grace of the father. He would have been satisfied to be just a slave, living in the slave quarters of the compound. He had done so much wrong, he had insulted his father so deeply - he could not believe in full restoration.

You could say, his theology about God was not correct. He did not have a proper view of atonement and of the forgiveness God offers.

But his father embarrassed himself by running to the son and he warmly embraced him. His father showed him all the honor a son could desire. He must have been swept of his feet by so much grace and love.

He received new clothes, he received the signet ring of the father, he was treated to a magnificent party. "My son was lost and now he is found".

And that, my friends, is how God receives us when we come to him. Our feelings about what we have done may be bad - and rightly so. We may feel loaded with guilt and shame. We may not conceive of God's goodness. But God gives the most magnificent welcome to anyone who desires to start all over again.

The boy came back, thinking he would just be a slave. But for his father, he was nothing less than a son, with all the rights that belong to that position. He received - again - the full right to inherit.

I have noticed that in many churches, we put a lot of focus on this specific moment of repentance. On the moment when we return to God for the first time.

But the Christian life is not about entering into the kingdom of God - it is really about being in the house of the Father. Repentance is extremely important. It is the door into the house of our Father. But once we have entered, why continue discussing the door? The joy is that we are in the house now!

God treats you as his child. As his beloved son or daughter. You live in the magnificent palace of the Father, and one day the full extent of this inheritance shall be fully visible and experienced by us.

We have a foretaste now, but that is just the beginning. Our eucharist is such foretaste of the eternal feast of being with God in his house.

We have received the Holy Spirit in our lives - we are temples of God - as the first downpayment, and much more is to come.

And one day, we will be like him, fully perfect and holy; we will see God as he is.

The blessings of being in the house with God our Father are amazing - so why do we focus so much on the door of repentance and forgiveness that gave us access? Why even so much extra attention every year during Lent?

3 dialectical process

Because it is important to never forget the basis of our salvation. To always be aware that we are in the house of God because we turned from darkness to light and God, in his grace, accepted us.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, we also see the older brother. He never left his father. He had always been in the house with him. The Father told him, 'all I have is yours'.

But the example of that son makes clear that people who are with God in his house, who have always been close to him - also need repentance and forgiveness again and again.

We can never stop focussing on our repentance and on his forgiveness.

The older son in the story did not lead a bad life - but he did not love his "Christian" brother enough, and he insulted his father. He insulted him by questing his love, by questioning his motives, by refusing to feast with the father and his brother. He stayed outside the house.

So in our Christian life we can never forget about the door into the house of God - because it is also the basis of our ongoing relationship with our Father. Surely, the first time we turn to God is very special as we enter into his presence, and we receive his pardon, we become his children.

But even as his children, even as we live in the house with the Father, we return to him again and again with repentance.

If we do not continually return to Him in repentance, we distance ourselves from God - as the older son in the parable did.

The longer we are on the road with Christ, the longer we live in the house of the Father, the more sensitive we become to our own shortcomings. Because in his light, we see our own dark spots better. The longer we follow Christ, the more we are aware of our need for forgiveness.

This seems to be a dialectical process. We move closer to him and in that process, we are more aware of his perfection and our own imperfection. So we repent.

And by doing so we move closer to him. And we become more aware of our sins. And each time God says, come my child, you are mine, and all I have is yours.

Each time we come to the table of our Lord, we say, I am not worthy, and each time he beckons us to come closer and be with him.

And even in heaven, where all is perfect, John the Apostle says, "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne."

So even in heaven - in our eternal house of God - we are reminded of our repentance and Gods forgiveness through the death of Christ for us. This is the whole basis of our existence. This is at the heart of the universe of God.

conclusion

So, concluding,,as Christians, we live in a never ending cycle, moving upwards, of returning to God, repenting, receiving his forgiveness, and being restored in our relationship with God.

We are in this cycle, not as slaves outside the house of God, but we are insiders. We are God's children.

So even as we enjoy God's goodness and grace, we return to him again and again humbly. To confess our sins. "I have messed up again, my Father".

And God just embraces you. Again and again. "My child, you are part of my feast. All I have is yours."

Amen