

The Joy of Repentance, Sting of Rebellion

Luke 15:11-24

*"Just so, I tell you, there is **joy** before the angels of God **over one sinner who repents.**"*

Introduction: Hearing the stories of our youth students at camp this last week reminded me of what it was like growing up in a church and youth group in the 1990's, the era of Newsboys concerts, Michael W. Smith ballads/concerts, and bigger and better youth events. At these events, there would be some form of concert, followed by a national speaker, which lead to the inevitable **testimony** of a college-age student. This testimony would be designed to grab the attention and shake the emotion. It would go something like this: *"I grew up in a Christian home, but rebelled against my family and the church, ended up getting into drugs, living on the street, stealing, dealing, and freewheeling until one day, in some dramatic event (car accident, near death experience, drug deal gone wrong, etc.), I hit rock bottom and God saved me out of the pit."* As a teen, I heard many stories like these, and unfortunately have also heard how some/too many of these slipped back into old lifestyles and ways. But it made me almost **want** to rebel in order to have the testimony! It also unintentionally minimized the miracle that takes place when **any sinner repents and turns to God in the gospel of Jesus Christ**. The reality is, **every person starts out a rebel against God**, it simply is a matter of how much we can hide or sanitize it before others.

We turn to a familiar story, one which Mark Twain called "**The greatest story ever told by the greatest story teller who ever lived**", popularly called "the Prodigal Son"¹ It is a story of rebellion, a heartbroken father, a wayward son, an awakening and return, followed by restoration and celebration. This is a story of **two brothers** and a Father. Both boys were lost. One was **morally lost, while the other was lost in his morality**. One came to realize it, the other was oblivious. When we think of the Prodigal Son, we think of God's **lavish grace** to the wayward and **extravagant love** for the returner, and we do rightly. But the point of the story is to call out the false thinking of the Pharisees, who believed they could earn salvation through their works, and highlight the fact that there is much rejoicing when ANY sinner repents by faith alone.

This morning is an opportunity for all of us to **remember the crisis point of faith** that we came to before salvation, when we were awakened to the reality of God's holiness and our sin, crying out for God's mercy. This is for those who are **still in the process of rebelling**, thinking that there is happiness on your own, outside of God's purpose. This is for those who are still **loving prodigals**, those who are still in the crisis, who are wandering away to their own shame and detriment, but who God can still seek and save. The whole of this chapter displays what God rejoices in: when sinners **repent and are saved**. So we rejoice with Him.

A Question Raised in Rebellion (11-12)

Luke 15:11-12 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And **he divided his property** between them.

The Reason for the Story

¹ The word **Prodigal** is not one we use often, and means "spend thrift", one who "spends recklessly and extravagantly". We use this to describe the younger brother in the story, but it could be applied to God, who lavishly extravagantly pours His love and grace on the most undeserving.

Before looking at the familiar story, it is imperative that we understand the **context** of the parable, as it is with ALL parables. **Luke 15:1-2** tells us exactly why Jesus told three parables:

*Now the **tax collectors** and **sinners** were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes **grumbled**, saying, "This man receives **sinners** and eats with them*

In the Pharisees' worldview there was no room for **tax collectors** and **sinners**, and they were either too far gone or unable to change, so they were shunned, shamed, or ignored. Jesus came to change that. He told simple stories of lost and found: a sheep and coin, both with a similar refrain:

*Just so, I tell you, there will be more **joy in heaven** over one **sinner** who **repents** than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (v. 7)*

*Just so, I tell you, there **is joy before the angels of God** over one **sinner** who **repents**." (v. 10)*

These parables reveal God's heart, the motivation of Christ's work on the cross, and the display of love that He has for every sinner. What is stated explicitly in vv. 7 and 10 is then explained vividly in the story of **two brothers**, and though words like "repent" and "joy" are not in this story, the actual showing of what these look like are shown.

The Root of the Request

It is a far too common occurrence where a son wants out, wants to leave the family and rid himself of the perceived shackles of responsibility placed on him. Often the older brother (or first born) is responsible, looking out for the family where the younger does not bear the same view of what is needed for the family. Here we have a story told of a younger brother who thinks he **knows best**, what will bring him true happiness and joy, and is willing to leave all that he knew, all that loved him, to get it.

In the Middle Eastern culture that Jesus taught in, wealth was accumulated over time through the possession of property, cattle, and servants. This was to continue on from generation to generation, and with the passing along came with it the responsibility to grow the inheritance and take care of those that it influenced. We often don't hand down property in California, but this still happens in places like Ohio. My sister and brother-in-laws are the 4th generation living on the family farm, and it will be passed down to their kids to live on. A son was expected to carry it forward and pass it on. This single request of the younger son to have his inheritance early would have shattered the honor of a family and brought about lasting, lifelong consequences.

Now comes the first gasping point of the story. In asking his father for his inheritance at this point, he was literally stating that **he wished his father was dead**, and treated him as such. The inheritance was promised but could not be collected until the patriarch passed away, so the monetary value of the inheritance was more important to him than the relationship with dad. **He wanted out**. It was the ultimate expression of **self-love**, of selfish intent, and of dishonorable gain. Today we sanitize these same types of requests by saying we **want to live authentically, be who we are, and not suppress how we were made**. These are all code words for a desire to live **OPENLY SELFISH**, convinced that the roadblock to happiness is ANYONE who would tell me what to do, or any responsibility I don't like, or anything that is hard.

The Cost of Division

The ripple effects would have come swiftly. Not only would such a request mean he wanted his father dead, but it would be familial suicide. The expected response would have been to initiate a swift right cross to the son's face. It would be the height of **shame in an honor driven culture** that would cause the family to respond to the son as being dead to them. A family would even conduct a funeral service signifying the death of a son. This was not simple rebellion; this was **treason**.

But as will become quite common in this story, the Father did something uncommon, even unthinkable. Instead of having the son leave empty handed, he actually divided up the inheritance. This was no simply liquidation. This was not calling up your broker and taking out some of your **401K** or taking out equity in your house. This would have been a painful process. **Deuteronomy 21:17** says that the older brother would have received twice what the younger brother got. This meant the younger brother would have received **1/3 of all the father had**. To actually get money in hand, this property had to be sold as a **future, a commodity of speculation** someone would purchase and wait until the father died. This would mean the son was willing to take less, pennies on the dollar, to get his money now. This not only left the brother with less than he rightfully deserved, but left the family with less to pass down.

Rebellion is **self-centered**. It believes that truth and right are found within, and refuses to submit to anything or anyone. It believes happiness can be found in possessions rather than loving relationship. This rebellion was less about sinning against God's Law as much as sinning against a relationship with God. When we seek our own way, we declare that God is not enough, that we know better than He, and that He has kept us from the happiness we've always craved. Some of you have been through this type of rebellion. Some are going through this. **How does it feel to be in the Father's position? When the one you love more than your own life turns away to destruction?** This is where we begin to understand the heart of God.

A Journey into Rebellion (13-16)

Luke 15:13-16 *Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

Living the Rebellious Life

Notice that the Father let him go. He did not try to control his son, but was willing to let him have what he wanted, giving him over to his desires. This is important to remember about God: **He does not hold us against our will, but like a good father, allows us to see that when we live according to our will, it ends with the opposite result of what we hoped.**

It did not take long for this son to leave. He turned the paperwork into cash and he was out, his pockets bursting with more money than he'd ever seen. He left to go to a **distant country**, out of all that was familiar, away from anyone that would have known him, and far beyond the influence of his family. He would have entered into Gentile territory and turned his back on all that he was raised with. He spent **lavishly**, not withholding anything that his heart wanted, indulging in every vice, **including prostitution** (v. 30). He gained friends, as you could imagine, as long as the money flowed. The party was ongoing, until the money ran out. That's when the friends left, the good times stopped, and the fun was gone. Reality set in. For the first time in his life he experienced want. For the first time in his life he did not know if there'd be enough for tomorrow. To make matters worse circumstantially, and so often enhances our rebellious decisions, there was a **severe famine** in the land. This was the type of severity

where people would stoop to the depths of human decency, where one would eat the unimaginable, selling their kids as slaves so they could eat, and even descending to cannibalism to remain alive. The rebel life did not live up to the hype, and **rebellion quickly turned to desperation.**

Reaching the end of Rebellions Offer

A sign of rebellion is a constant turning to self for answers, summoning strength to fix, to do, to solve on your own. Even at the point of desperation, this young man believed he could get out of the situation by himself. **I can do this. I can fix this. I don't need anyone!** So he came up with **Plan A**, a way to circumvent his circumstances to continue living the life he'd always wanted, the life of his dreams, making his own way without anyone telling HIM what to do.

Plan A stunk. It was a pipe dream. His plan was to **hire himself out** to an owner to make ends meet. He actually believed he was not entitled to an extravagant life for the first time and was willing to work simply to eat, to fill the cravings of his groaning belly. But the famine was so severe, there were not jobs to be had nor food in abundance. The language of this plan was that **he clung to the leg, joining himself with to a citizen.** In other words, he was a desperate beggar. To simply rid himself of this nuisance, the man told him to go feed the pigs in the field. This was not a paying gig, but simply a way for the owner to get the young man out of his sight. It was in the fields that the young man hit rock bottom. He looked at the carob pods, those that had already had any moisture extracted and were edible only for pigs, that the man longed to eat. The picture is equally sad and tragic. Where months and days before he was living in the lap of luxury, this young man now found himself trying to outwrestle pigs for inedible slop. At this point, all help was gone, no friend was found, and **no one gave him anything.** If nothing changed, a lonely death was all that could come, and the last bits of sand were tumbling out of the hour glass.

But as so happens with God, in the deepest pit, in the most hopeless case, in the seemingly impossible situation, **grace shines the brightest!**

A Repentant Response out of Rebellion (17-19)

Luke 15:17-19 *"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."'"*

The Accurate Assessment

Repentance begins with an accurate assessment of our real condition. This young, entitled, selfish, arrogant punk who had made waste to his life came to a place where he finally realized it. He came to himself, breaking through the lies and deception that he believed so heartily, and began to see himself in light of who his father was. He was no longer playing games, no longer making excuses, no longer telling people what they wanted to hear, but simply gave an honest assessment of where he was.

He began by **remembering his Father (An accurate view of God).** This is when all that you were taught growing up, all that you had heard and willfully forgot comes together. He reflected on a Father who was compassionate, kind, and merciful. His Father would hire day laborers, hired servants who would not simply get the standard rate as set by the Law, they would get more (they had more than enough). His Father kept the Law but went above it to care for those under His charge. He began to imagine what it would be to simply work the fields and receive a wage that purchased more bread than one needed.

He was ready to **admit he could not do it on his own, that he needed help, and that he needed his Fathers help.**

The Humble Appeal

So he rehearsed his appeal, not to manipulate, but to make sure he made clear his conclusion. When he would see his dad again, he would utter a few simple, but powerful statements: **1) Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you -** This is a recognition of the origin of his sin and the source of his rebellion. No blame-shifting, no explaining away, no minimizing of what was done, simply a broken realization. Jesus could have been harkening back to **Ezra 9:6** where the people of Israel confessed their sin to the Lord, "**O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.**" Not only have I sinned, I have sinned greatly, stacked up to the heavens. But I've also sinned against you directly, Father, and have broken the relationship that we had, that you intended. **2) I am no longer worthy to be your son -** This was not false humility, no show of false contrition, no carefully crafted letter by a publicist. This was a recognition that in his self he had NOTHING to make himself worthy. **3) Please hire me back as one of your day laborers -** Be merciful to me, as you have shown mercy, to treat me like you have treated others. Let me work and make restitution, let me earn back what I lost, let me work off my guilt and shame.

Now understand at **this point of the story**, the Pharisee's would have smugly been folding their arms in agreement. They would have heartily agreed that this son's only recourse was to bow his head in shame, to kiss the Father's feet, and **work off his loss**. In the minds of the Pharisees, and the teaching of the scribes, this is the **ONLY** way to repent. *Pay it back, pay it off, make up for it*, no matter how long it takes, and then, maybe we can get back to where we were before. **Isn't that what so many of us believe?** We need to earn our way back to God, making restitution for our sin, **DOING** something to get back to God. Not only does this mean a life of slavish misery, it means a life separate from God. God does NOT ALLOW us to earn back our favor with Him, because He alone can do it.

A Covering of the Shame of Rebellion (20-22)

Luke 15:20-24 *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* And they began to **celebrate**.

The Unexpected Sprint

What did the son face in coming back? Shame. Public scorn, overt dishonor, and ridicule, all the things that we think will happen when we enter back into a family or church after dealing with ongoing sin. The son knew what was going to happen, and it was why the journey back was prolonged. He would have to do the walk of shame through the town, requesting an audience with the Father, which he would not receive. His Father would distance himself for a time so that penitence could be shown. The son would sit outside the gate for days, in all his filth and stench and open himself up to the public's feelings. He then would lower his head, bowing down to the Father, kissing his feet while the Father deliberated on a proper plan of reparation. Only after the debt was paid could a relationship begin again. This is what the Pharisees expected, but it is not what they got.

The Father, who had been **looking for and watching for His wayward son** (our Dad seeks and saves the lost!), is the first to see his son from a far distance. The son who had requested the death of the Father

and wanted release from the family name was continually sought by his Father. **But then you could hear the gasp let out by the Pharisees as Jesus continued the story:** *The Father ran after the son.* This was no stroll or jog, but the technical term for **racing in a stadium**. He sprinted after His boy. This would have been unheard of because it was a **SHAMEFUL THING FOR A MIDDLE EASTERN MAN OF AGE AND STATURE TO DO**. To run at full sprint, the Father would have had to lift up his robe, exposing his legs, which would have immediately shamed himself. He got to His son and covered his shame, kissing him continually instead of waiting for his feet to be kissed.

Why did the Father shame Himself? Why did He allow Himself to be open to public ridicule? Not only to cover the shame of what His son **would** have faced. The son deserved what he would have received from the town, the family, and the Father, but instead found mercy. This is exactly what Jesus did on the cross for us. He entered into humanity, becoming a man, facing the muck and filth of mankind, and not shying away from the shame of the cross. **He took our shame so we did not have to face the consequences by enduring the death that we deserved.** This is the epitome of love, lavishly, extravagantly, recklessly given to us.

Notice the beauty of what the son says to the Father after getting pummeled with affection. He goes through what he'd rehearsed 100 times, and gets to the point of hiring himself back, but stops short. He talked about his sin and unworthiness, but not about working for acceptance. This is where the Father's grace is truly seen, and where the Pharisee's began to lose it. The Father welcomes back His Son without any hint of works. He embraces His son in the midst of stench, when he was a beggar, when there was nothing positive to offer except merely a pleading for mercy. The Father gives to His son in a way that exemplifies grace and angers the self-righteous.

The Father **immediately** looks to bring His son back, not as a groveling, shameful beggar but as a lost son that had been found. He calls for a robe, the best robe, his own robe (equivalent to his best suit, reserved for the most special occasions) to be put on his son, showing everyone that his son was to be **honored**. He put his own **signet ring** on his boy, the one that would seal documents and possessed the family crest. This meant that the son was given **authority** to begin to conduct family business again on behalf of the Father Himself. He was given sandals which were worn only by the family, where servants and hired hands would have bare feet. This meant that the son now was a **master, having responsibility** to lead the home. He was given back full and complete sonship, with no lag time or work done.

The Unparalleled Celebration

The Father called for the fattened calf, one reserved for the wedding celebration of a son. It was a celebration of lost being found, that which was dead being born again. It was a triumph of **grace over sin at its worst**. It was a celebration of a Father's love for His own, a willingness to pay the price that was owed to buy back a son who repents. It was a restoration of sonship with all its benefits. **This is our salvation. This is how God saved US IN OUR REBELLION. This is our story.** This is what we remember and celebrate each day, and each time we gather together.

Jesus took our shame. He ran after us and saved us from our sin, embracing us as sons, giving us the full rights that we had given up. This is what we celebrated when came to the table of communion, remembering the death of Christ, His blood and body given for us. **Joy is a result of God's gift of repentance**, knowing that we earned what we deserved but have been given what we never could. No paying back, no working for, no works to offer. Only the forgiveness that comes through the work of Jesus, who saves us from our sin and out of our shame, to now enjoy, obey, and make much of Him each day. This is what heaven rejoices in, and what delights our heavenly Father.