

East Hill Church Sermon Discussion Guide: The Heart of the Father

Guest Speaker: Pastor Keith Jenkins

Date: March 31st, 2024

Introduction:

In this Easter message, Pastor Keith Jenkins explored the well-known parable of the prodigal son, focusing on the heart of the father towards his lost son. He highlighted the scandalous love and grace of God, who welcomes and celebrates the return of sinners, no matter how far they have strayed. Pastor Keith challenged the church to embody the father's heart, creating a community where the broken and lost can find acceptance, belonging, and restoration.

The Audience: Two Groups

Pastor Keith drew attention to the two distinct groups in Jesus' audience: the tax collectors and "notorious sinners," and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These groups represented opposite ends of the religious spectrum, yet Jesus welcomed and ate with both. This scandalous behavior revealed the heart of God, who desires relationship with all people, regardless of their moral or social status.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus intentionally spent time with both "sinners" and religious leaders? What does this reveal about God's heart?
2. How can we, as a church, create a welcoming environment for people from all backgrounds and lifestyles?
3. In what ways might we unconsciously create barriers or distinctions that keep certain people from feeling accepted in our church community?

Supporting Verses:

Luke 15:1-2 - "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

Context and Reflection:

- **Historical/Cultural Context:** In Jesus' day, tax collectors and "sinners" were despised and considered unclean by religious leaders. Eating with them was a sign of acceptance and friendship.
- **Theological Significance:** Jesus' actions demonstrated that God's love and grace extend to all people, regardless of their past or social status. He came to seek and save the lost.
- **Application:** As followers of Christ, we are called to imitate His inclusive love and to break down barriers that prevent people from experiencing God's grace.

Mark 2:17 - "On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Context and Reflection:

- **Historical/Cultural Context:** The religious leaders criticized Jesus for associating with "sinners," believing that righteous people should avoid them.
- **Theological Significance:** Jesus clarified that His mission was to call sinners to repentance and restoration, not to affirm the self-righteous.
- **Application:** We must recognize our own need for God's grace and extend that same grace to others, rather than judging or excluding them.

The Prodigal Son: Rebellion and Return

Pastor Keith walked through the first part of the prodigal son story, highlighting the younger son's rebellion, his squandering of his inheritance, and his eventual return to the father. He emphasized the father's unconditional love and scandalous acceptance of his lost son, running to embrace him and welcome him home.

Discussion Questions:

1. How have you experienced the Father's unconditional love in your own life, even in moments of rebellion or doubt?
2. What can we learn from the father's response to his son's return? How should this shape the way we treat those who are far from God?
3. Share about a time when you "came to your senses" and returned to the Father after a season of wandering. What prompted your return?

Supporting Verses:

Luke 15:20 - "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

Context and Reflection:

- **Historical/Cultural Context:** In Jesus' culture, a father running to embrace his wayward son was considered undignified and scandalous. It demonstrated an extreme love and acceptance.
- **Theological Significance:** The father's response illustrates God's unconditional love and eagerness to welcome repentant sinners back into His family.
- **Application:** We should never feel too far gone or too ashamed to return to our Heavenly Father. He is always ready to run to us with open arms.

Luke 15:24 - "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."

Context and Reflection:

- **Historical/Cultural Context:** In the parable, the father's celebration of his lost son's return was extravagant and joyful, reflecting the value he placed on his son's life.

- **Theological Significance:** This verse emphasizes the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and the Father's delight in restoring the lost to Himself.
 - **Application:** As the church, we should celebrate and rejoice when the lost are found, creating an atmosphere of joy and acceptance for those who return to God.
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Conclusion/Reflection:

Pastor Keith's message powerfully illustrates the scandalous love and grace of our Heavenly Father, who welcomes and celebrates the return of every lost son and daughter. As the church, we are called to embody this same heart, creating a community where the broken and hurting can find acceptance, belonging, and restoration. We must be willing to break down barriers, extend grace, and joyfully embrace those who are far from God, remembering that we too were once lost but have been found and welcomed home by the Father.

Reflection Questions:

1. How can you personally extend the Father's love and acceptance to someone in your life who is far from God?
 2. What practical steps can our church take to become a more welcoming and inclusive community, reflecting the heart of the Father?
 3. Take a moment to reflect on the Father's unconditional love for you. How does this truth impact the way you view yourself and others?
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Prayer Requests:

[Share any personal prayer requests, and pray over the week ahead]

References:

Primary Sources:

- "The Heart of the Father" Sermon, East Hill Church, 04/09/2024. Delivered by Pastor Keith Jenkins.
- Sermon Discussion Guide, Provided by Kelly Paxton, and East Hill Church.
- The Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV). Biblica, Inc.™, 2011.

Secondary Sources:

- Contextual and Theological Insights: Derived from general biblical scholarship and commentaries relevant to the verses from Luke 15 and Mark 2.

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- Keller, Timothy. "The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith." Dutton, 2008.

- Nouwen, Henri J. M. "The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming." Convergent Books, 1994.

Linguistic and Grammatical Resources:

- Strong, James. "The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible." Thomas Nelson, 2010.
- Vine, W.E., Merrill F. Unger, and William White. "Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words." Thomas Nelson, 1996.

Collaborative Contributions:

- LLM Contributions: Based on a mixture of licensed data, data created by AI models, and publicly available data, synthesized for the study of the provided sermon transcript and biblical verses.

LLM Training Data:

- LLM Training Data. Includes a diverse range of texts (books, websites, and other publications) up to September 2023.