

## AUTHENTIC RELIGION Luke 15:11-32

### THEME:

In Fritz Ridenour's book, *How To Be a Christian Without Being Religious*, Ridenour defines religion as trying to reach God, find God, and please God through our own feeble, futile and fruitless efforts.

Ridenour contends that Christianity is not a religion because Christianity teaches that *God* has reached out to us so that He can give us the ultimate and eternal pleasure of everlasting life.

But some still do not know the good news that God has reached out to them. They are still trying to reach God, find God and please God by their own efforts.

For the past couple of weeks, we've been studying the parable in Luke 15:11-32, about a man who had two sons. We've considered it with special emphasis on the younger son. We've considered it with special emphasis on the loving father. And this week, we are going to look at the parable again with special emphasis on the older son.

The story of this older brother, who appears at the end of the parable, is often viewed as an awkward postscript to the main story of the wasteful younger son. But I think that, in point of fact, the tale of the older brother *is* the main story. Would you watch with me while we see his story played out? Perhaps you will agree with me that it is a timely tale that is truly told.

Let's read it again:

<sup>11</sup> *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

<sup>13</sup> *"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

<sup>17</sup> *"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to*

*be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’<sup>20</sup> 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.*

<sup>21</sup> *“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

<sup>22</sup> *“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

<sup>25</sup> *“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’*

<sup>28</sup> *“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*

<sup>31</sup> *“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”*

As I read this story, if I don’t stop before the end, I am struck with the attitude of the older son. It seems to me that the older of the two sons is:

**I. Uncaring at his brother’s absence**

You will remember that the younger of the two sons asked for his share of his father’s estate early...while his father was still alive. And when he got his share, he went off to a far country and wasted all of his money in what was called “wild living.”

When the younger son came home, the text says that his father saw him while he was still a long way off. That must mean that the father had been looking for him...waiting for him and longing to see him.

But what we do not read is anything about the absent son's older brother watching for the young man. There is no indication that he longed for him. Or even missed him.

I suspect he may even have been pleased that his brother had left and that he stayed away. For one thing, don't you suppose it made the older brother look really good? The young son was wayward, wasteful and wandering but the rock-solid older brother was where he belonged. He had to feel pretty smug about his loyalty to his father and to the family farm.

Not only did his brother's behavior make the older son look loyal, the fruits of his labor all went into his account since his younger brother had already blown his share. The father had already acknowledged that the firstborn now owned the farm and any other remaining assets. "All I have is yours," said his Dad.

Don't you know that the same attitude can be seen among "religious" people? They can feel very smug about their "religion" and about how upright they are.

Jesus told another parable about that attitude. It is found in Luke 18:9-14. And listen to the context for this parable:

<sup>9</sup>*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

<sup>13</sup> *"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

<sup>14</sup> *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Jesus told this parable to people "who were confident of their own righteousness." And he told it about a man who "stood up and prayed about himself." That is exactly the attitude of the older brother. And it is exactly the attitude of some very religious people today: a smug self-centeredness that is grateful they are better than anyone else. Jesus warns us about having such an attitude.

## II. **Insensitive to his father's pain**

The second thing I notice about the older brother is that he was insensitive to his father's pain. There is no indication of any empathy, any compassion or any understanding for the hurt his father had been feeling.

In fact, his words bear testimony: "This son of yours ..." he called him.

*'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'*

Not "my brother" but "this son of yours". The judgmental, critical, negative, disparaging and disapproving tone is obvious. What is also obvious is that the older son had no appreciation for what his father had felt when one of his sons was estranged nor what he was feeling now that he was back home.

When you see people who want nothing to do with the Lord, how does it make you feel? Smug? Self-righteous? Superior? Or do you hurt with your heavenly Father who grieves the loss of His child?

## III. **Unforgiving on his brother's return**

The time eventually came when the wasteful younger son came home. And when he did, he was welcomed and forgiven...by his father. But not by his brother.

I get the older brother...don't you? His younger brother did not deserve to come back into the household. He had been rude to his father by asking for his inheritance early. He had been irresponsible in his use of the money he had received. He had probably brought a certain amount of shame to the family name. If the older boy had been given a vote, he might have cast it against letting the kid come home.

But forgiveness is a big hang-up for Jesus. He fixates on this more than baptism, tithing, Bible study, orthodoxy, or even prayer.

I am not sure Jesus gets how difficult it is to forgive. Doesn't he know what it is to be faithful when others are not? Doesn't he understand how it feels to be working on behalf of his father while others are just looking out for themselves? Doesn't Jesus grasp the experiencing of being the one who is called upon to sacrifice the most on behalf of the father?

Oh yeah! I guess he does get it. And from the face of a cross, he made a heartfelt and special request: "Father, forgive them."

The one who asks you to forgive your brothers is the one who has forgiven you.

#### **IV. Indifferent of his household's joy**

In Jesus' parable, the older brother was also indifferent to his household's joy.

When the party was going on in the house, the older son was out in the field. He inquired of a servant about the sounds of celebration. He did not know what the festive occasion was. Doesn't that make you think he must not have been invited?

It also makes me think that even though he had never left the farm, he was more estranged from his father than was his younger brother. Had his heart been in harmony with his dad's, he would have anticipated the reason for the singing and dancing – because he would have known what would prompt such a celebration in his father's house.

Now folk, please do not miss the point of this parable. God loves you. If you are faithful, reliable and dependable in His service, He loves you. And if you are irresponsible, unfaithful and estranged from Him, He still loves you. His love for you is not dependent on how you treat Him.

But because He loves you, He does not want you to stay away from Him. He wants you to come home.

And because He wants each of His children to come home, He wants us to share in His rejoicing anytime one returns to His embrace.

Luke 15 opens with these words:

*<sup>1</sup> Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

He does, you know. And he expects us to welcome them, too.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

This older brother seemed to be such a fine son. He certainly felt that way about himself. He told his father he had "been slaving" for him for years and that he had "never disobeyed" his orders. But is he really a good son who considers working for his father to be "slaving" and who considers his father's will to be "orders"? Is there not a better way to do the work of your father? Is it not better to desire to know, love and serve your father because you realize it is the greatest thing in all your life?

**INVITATION:** # 644 – "The Greatest Thing"