

Title: You are dead to me
Text: Luke 15.11-16
Theme: Sin will take us farther than we can imagine.
Series: Luke. The 2 Sons part 1
Prop Stmtnt: The wages of sin are a gift of mercy if it opens our eyes.

Read Text:

Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve are close and with them, the festivities, traditions, memories and for many, angst and sorrow. The source of some of our deepest pleasure is also the source of our deepest sorrows. It is axiomatic. The things that have the capacity to thrill you also have the capacity to hurt you and you do not have to look beyond your own family for that experience. The images of family eating together, opening presents, going to a concert, playing games, watching football, laughing together, watching a movie are so pleasant, it's almost intoxicating. But as we know there is another side to that coin. There are separations, loss, unresolved conflict, family members who won't talk to one another, fights, and a great deal of loneliness and sadness. For most, there is a gap between what is, and what we imagine. Family has the capacity to thrill us and cut us deep to the bone.

It is a natural and logical question for the holidays. "Is the family coming in?" "Are you going to see family?" "When is your family getting together?" And it is not just holidays. When someone is facing serious surgery, when a baby is born, when someone receives terrible news, or a tragedy occurs, or when someone is dying, we know the family comes together. Weddings (joy), funerals (sorrow) revolve around family. We all know it. We're all in it. We all feel it. Some of you are blessed to have more joy than sorrow. Others of you carry the burden of more sorrow than joy. We all have family, somewhere, and at some time. These words immediately resonate.

"And he said, 'There was a man who had two sons.'"

If you know your father, you feel this as you hear this. If you have a sibling, you consider this as well. If you are the older or younger sibling, you identify yourself in this. If you are a father, or a mother, you quickly find yourself in the middle of this story. For many of us, we will identify at some point with all 3 characters. In fact, that is exactly what Jesus intends. I plan to preach 4 sermons from this text that is popularly known as the story of the prodigal son. However, I am not going to call it that, because it is more than that. This is also the story of the Father's deep mercy and the older son's deep resentment of that mercy. But it is the younger son's agonizing actions that set the stage for it all. He doesn't ask. He demands. Does he have any idea of what he just said? It is a deep sin and therefore, a deep grief.

1. **Deep Sin and Deep Grief** (11-12)

What child gives orders to his father? Have you ever done that? Have you ever ordered your parents around? "Give me!" The offense of that demand gives way to grief as you realize that this is the cry of a child demanding to be God. Demanding his world do what he wants. What is

behind that? 1) There is the idea that “I am in charge.” I get to issue the commands in this relationship. 2) Entitlement. I am entitled to my parent’s possessions, estate, and stuff. *“Give me the share of property that is coming to me.”* The older son usually got double what the younger son would get. The right of the firstborn son carried the responsibility to take care of everything to. It could be that when the younger son realized that he was only getting a third and that his brother was getting two-thirds, he decided to leave. He didn’t ask. He demanded. You owe me. Give me! The arrogance dripping off these words is ugly and full of contempt and utter disregard for his father’s situation much less affection for him. But don’t miss the hate. 3) Hate. This is hateful. I don’t care what this does to my father. I don’t care what this does to the estate. I don’t care how much I inconvenience him, shame him, dishonor him, embarrass him, put him through all of this, I don’t care. The younger son demands that *“the share of property that is coming to him”* be given to him, now. When the father dies, it would be his then. By demanding it now, he is basically saying that he wished his father dead. In order to fulfill the demand, the father has to legally divide the property and cash out the younger son’s portion. Is this land, crops, herds, buildings, equipment, servants? The rest of the text speaks of servants (plural) a field, an animal, a house, etc. So, the estate is more than a simple savings account. The father would have to get an evaluation and fair market value of all of the assets, then get the paperwork set and make arrangements for the younger son’s portion to be sold and turned into cash. This is a lot of work and a lot of grievous work. Everything the father is doing is because his son has made this offensive request.

Many of you have had a taste of this. Why am I meeting with an attorney? Why am I getting these papers written up? Why am I talking with a real estate agent? Why do I have to sign these papers? Why do I have to make these decisions? Why do I have to go to court? Everything is a reminder of a deeply painful situation. Did the father realize this before, or is the reality of this dawning on him now? I am doing this because my son hates my guts.

If you are a landowner and you are sitting down with an attorney to write up your estate, or to have these kinds of conversations, you know that it is in those settings where the sad stories come out. Who is going to be power of attorney? Who is going to be health care power of attorney? Who is going to get what? If you have 2 children and one is a CPA and the other a doctor and they love you, love one another, live close by and get along fabulously well, then drafting up your estate papers is sobering, but not a grief. However, if you have a child who cannot be trusted with money because they have demonstrated that they will blow it on gambling, alcohol, drugs, parties or other forms of terrible decisions, then you have a hard decision to make. Did you work all those years so this kid could destroy himself? Are you going to give him an equal share in the inheritance that he will most certainly use to finish blowing up his life? How do you deal with the kid who has already cost you more money than the others because you have bailed him out of trouble? It only takes one child who has made really bad decisions to create a lot of turmoil and this father is in a lot of turmoil and it is not hidden.

Every decision this father has to make now is made in sorrow. This is not what he imagined. His son’s demand is a deep sin of dishonor and a deep grief of shame upon the dad. Do you realize what this younger son is saying? *“Father, you are dead to me.”* If you were dead, I would have

this. I want it now. I am demanding to be given now, what I would be given if you were dead. Every ledger of inventory, every sale that turns property into cash, every conversation with people who were doing business, every step of dividing “*his property between them*” was an opportunity for the grief of the son’s hateful demand to break the father’s heart even more.

Have you ever been the father? Have you ever been the younger son? Have you ever been the older son? Life gives you many opportunities to be resentful. Does it still have a hold on you?

2. **My Life**. (13)

“Not many days later”

The son made his decision and stuck with it. Since he is still single, he is likely in his late teens. If he had any moments of self-doubt, any warnings or cautions from others, he ignored them. Having made his demand, his days of working for his father, perhaps working under his brother, were coming to an end. His dream of being free from work, free from responsibility, free from accountability, free from authority, free from someone else’s schedule and expectations were all going to be over. I can’t wait to get out of this place! He could, at long last do what he wanted, when he wanted and with whomever he wanted. This was the soundtrack that his hateful heart recorded and that he played over and over and over. If anyone tried to question him, talk to him, warn him, challenge him, he would play this soundtrack again and again in order to drown out all reason and conscience. *I don’t need you to worry for me ‘cause I’m alright. I don’t want you to tell me it’s time to come home. I don’t care what you say anymore this is my life. Go ahead with your own life leave me alone.*¹ The swagger just oozes with cool.

Putting on blinders, he did it. He did what he wanted. He gathered all he had and left. Did he hug his dad or let his dad hug him? Were there any final words, warnings, offers of pardon? He left and went into a far country. He went to another country. He left his family and left his people. He left everything he had known and since Jesus told this story to two audiences (tax collectors/ sinners and Pharisees/scribes) in his Jewish context, they would have understood this younger son to have left God. His father was dead to him. No contact. No plans to go back. “My life.” It is the theme song of hell. We only think we are free.

Money, fame, possessions, positions can for a season give the illusion that we get to make the rules. The younger son thought he was doing it his way. In reality, he was doing it Satan’s way and was playing right into his hand. No one but God is truly free. When this young man walked away with the world in his pockets, we all knew this would not end well for him. We’ve seen this same story over and over.

A friend of mine visited a pork packaging plant downtown when he was about 5. He said that he watched in a bit of amazement at the line of pigs going up the conveyer built apparently oblivious to the fact that at the top each pig would get hit with 4 electric prongs that would

¹ Billy Joel, 1978, My Life

instantly kill them. The carcass would then continue through packaging plant where it would become your dinner, or breakfast or sandwich for lunch. He said that he wondered why the pigs didn't send word down the conveyer belt warning the other pigs not to get on the belt.

Proverbs 22.3 *"The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it."* What is happening here? The younger son just got on the conveyer belt. No surprise here, the son squandered his property. He lost it all. How come we knew this was going to happen? And why do we know it is going to happen and do it anyway? He spent everything. How do you make friends in a far country? One timeless way is to spend a lot of money. You can buy a lot of people with money. But when the money ran out, so did the friends.

This world lies to you and your heart wants to believe those lies. Do you think that can tell God that he is dead to you? Do you think that will make God dead? Do you think that you can make the rules now? That you don't need God. You can do it your way? This is your life? If that is the message that is playing in your heart, you should know that it is actually the sound of electric prongs frying your rationality. Yep, my life. He lived as if there wasn't a tomorrow, except there was. Living as if there is no eternity, does not change the fact, there is. And he wasn't ready to face the music of his own heart. But some things in life do not give you a choice. The prudent see the danger and get off the conveyer belt. The pig-headed fool charges ahead.

3. The reckoning. (14)

What happens when you spend your life, your money your strength on things that don't matter? Well, you end up with things that don't matter. They are of no value. Life happens. Recessions are real. Famine, sickness, betrayal, being victimized, loss, happens. Life is not easy especially when you are not prepared. And what is worse, what did this young man trade away? He cashed in his dad, his faith, his family, his home, his job, his future, his people, his extended family that rallies together to help each other out. He traded in everything that mattered so that he could experience or have everything that didn't. *He began to be in need.* For the first time in his life, he began to be in need. For the first time in his life his real condition was exposed. Daddy wasn't there to bail him out. As they say, he made his bed and now he had to lie in it.

Have you ever been in need? Have you ever been faced with the consequences of your own failure and you had nowhere to go? This young man was a fool. He was arrogant, demanding, self-centered, and hateful. His money masked his real condition. And now, the money was gone and there was nothing to hide behind. What would he do? Would he admit that he had been wrong? Would he be willing to acknowledge that he had been the fool, that in trying to play others, he had been played? It is so hard to admit that we have been wrong. And as far down as this guy is, he is not ready to tap out. Not yet anyway.

*"I never said you had to offer me a second chance. I never said I was a victim of circumstance. I still belong. Don't get me wrong. And you can speak your mind, but not on my time. I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life. Go ahead with your own, leave me alone."*² He still has

² Ibid

swagger, but it's not so cool anymore. He wasn't ready to admit that he was wrong. He hadn't hit bottom, as they say. He still had his dignity. He wasn't going to grovel back home. He wasn't going to listen to the "I told you so's." No, he would figure this out. But he was a foreigner. He had no family. No connections. No standing. And no resources. What could he do? Jobs in a recession and famine are hard to come by even if you have an education and connections. He had no choice but to take the only thing available and this was clearly, the only thing available.

4. Humiliation (15)

He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country. This is the 3rd time Jesus mentions that "country". This is a Gentile country. Jews would not raise pigs. They are ceremonially unclean and they are incredibly filthy. My grandfather raised pigs on his farm in Iowa. You could smell them long before you could see them. These creatures redefine dirty. Their capacity for filth and disgust is actually quite amazing. And pigs are big and they are mean. Just throw some slop into the mud and watch them run each other over in order to eat. They look disgusting. They smell disgusting. And they sound disgusting. We say to little kids, "*what do pigs say?*" Oink, oink, oink sounds cute. Pigs don't oink. They snort. Snort is way different than oink. Snort sounds like they are hacking up a pint of phlegm. Here he was, feeding the pigs in the fields. Fields is plural. It sounds like there were a lot of pigs. This was rough. And it was everyday, all day. Pigs don't stop eating on the weekends. This is now "my life." The only good thing, if you could call it that, was that no one knew him. Of course, that meant that no one cared. But no one knew how far he had fallen. No one knew that the bottom had completely dropped out. He was humiliated, but no one knew back home yet. Maybe he could ride this out, figure something out, get back on his feet and turn this thing around.

Feeding pigs in someone else's fields gives you time to think. Who could he blame for this mess? We all want to blame someone else, but everything about this was on him. He couldn't blame his dad, brother or anyone. This was on him. This is the country he wanted to go to. This was the life that he left his family for. This is what he chose. This was the result of his decisions, but would he finally admit that he was wrong? This is painful but necessary. It is a good thing that he was in another country. His dad may have been tempted to bail him out. It hurts to watch our kids hurt even when it is the result of their rebellion. We call it enabling. We protect people from the consequences of their sin, but often times, the consequences are designed by God to bring someone to face the truth about themselves. It is painful to face the truth about ourselves and come face to face with the fact that there are plenty of things that we have to own up to. Sure, we have all been sinned against, but we will never begin to make progress, we will never grasp our need for grace until we own our failures and move from angry humiliation to humility.

There is a vast difference between humility and humiliation. Humility is just facing the truth about what we are. Humiliation is the angry, frustrated angst we feel when our circumstances reveal what we are so desperate to hide. He needed to go home, but he was not ready to admit that. So, he doubled down and fed pigs. Seriously, could it get any worse? Yes, it could and did.

5. Despair (16)

The money he earned was so little, that he could not even afford enough food to live on. This is ridiculous. The filthy pigs are being fed better than he is. He is so hungry that he finds himself longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. Then comes one of the most pathetic statements you will ever read. "And no one gave him anything." Jesus began this story with the son's demand to "GIVE ME" my share. Now, no one gives him anything. He has to work in order to survive, but every day he works, he gets closer to dying. And no one cares. If he dies, there will be someone else who will take the job.

The son imagined what his life would be away from his father. And for a time, it sounds like he had that. But there is a massive gap between his life now and what he was imagining a short while ago. He wanted his life. He wanted to be left alone. And now, he was. And he cannot save himself. He has nothing to offer.

Do you realize that apart from Christ, this is our story? We are the child who told our Creator Father to drop dead. Leave us alone. Let us live our lives, do what we want. We'll take the creation, we'll take our bodies, our minds, our strength, our talents, our abilities and spend them on ourselves. We can rule our lives. We can rule this world. When people ask why is this world such a mess? The answer is simple, but humbling. We asked for it. In fact, we demanded it. In order for us to realize our need God let us have what we wanted, for a time. God could have disowned us. He could have cut us off. He could have said, 'you are dead to me.' He didn't.