

Title: How do you know if you really love God?
Text: Luke 15.25-32
Theme: God's mercy on your enemy
Series: Luke
Aim: I aim to call my audience to embrace our Father's heart of mercy by opening our hearts to all who truly repent.

Mosul, Iraq may seem like an unlikely location for a supernatural work of God resulting in thousands of converts. It sure seemed like that to one missionary who was told directly by God to go there in order to preach God's Word. This guy had no interest in seeing a great work of God in that city and no intent on going, so he decided to go as far from there as he could imagine. But God was determined show mercy to the citizens of this city and he was determined that they would have the opportunity to hear his word in order to repent. So even though this missionary tried to run, God ordained some agents of his to hijack his ocean liner and redirect this missionary back to his mission.

As you may know, Mosul, Iraq is the modern name of the ancient city of Ninevah. The missionary was Jonah and when he reluctantly preached, the city repented and Jonah was angry. Because they repented, they avoided God's judgment. To Jonah, it was not fair that his enemies would be the recipients of God's mercy. That makes sense. Mercy is not fair. Mercy is mercy, not justice. And while God is a just and righteous God, he loves to have opportunities to show his mercy. So, how do you know if you really love God? One of the things that Jesus said was, *"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."* How do you know if you really love God? How do you respond when your enemy, or your competition, or your sibling, is the recipient of the Father's mercy?

Read Text:

1. **An opportunity for mercy** (25-27)

The older son was in the field and was coming back from the day's work when he hears the music and realizes that this is the music of dancing. He hears the songs that are played when friends and families gather together and celebrate together and he is confused. He was not aware of any celebration planned for this evening. Calling to one of the servants he asks for an explanation and the servant explains the event in personal terms. *Your brother* has come home and *your father* ordered the celebration. He was the one who gave the word for the fattened calf to be killed and prepared for a celebration *because he has received him back safe and sound.*

That's a lot to get your mind around. Jesus sets up the contrast. The younger came home and was received with affection, acceptance, and a celebration. Now in v.25 the older son comes home too, except he didn't come home from sinful living, he came home at the end of another long day of work. The son who came home after shaming the honor of the family is received with a party while the son whose life seeks to restore the honor is not even sent word that his

brother has come home and finds out, “on his own.” He didn’t even get a heads-up! The father was looking for the younger son to return, but the older son’s coming home was not a surprise, it was, well, assumed. And while the father was looking for the younger son to come home, the older brother was not. Either he did not think it was possible or he did not think that he would or should be received like this if he did come home. His younger brother had created chaos in the family. He and his brother were opposites. The older brother was loyal, dutiful, faithful, dependable and responsible. You could give him a job to do and know that it would be done. He did not cause stress, he alleviated it. What is going on here? It feels like we are rewarding rebellion. My brother gets his cake and gets to eat it too.

Look at v.27. The servant sounds like he is echoing the father. The servant has joined in the father’s joy and he explains the reason for the party in a way, that he assumes the older brother will respond just like he has, which is like the father. *Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.* Of course, there is going to be a party and of course, the older son is going to drop his tools and run like a banshee to the house to embrace his brother. Except that, he didn’t.

2. **An occasion for self-pity** (28-30)

When one sibling is the cause of heartache and drama for a family, the other sibling(s) often bear the weight of trying to compensate. “If I am good enough, or achieve more, then I can make up the loss my parents feel.” And yet, your dependability, responsibility and success never cover the loss and because your parents don’t have to worry about you, you tend to get overlooked and, in some cases, slighted. They have to bail him out of jail. They have to pay attorney fees and fines for him. They have to make extra trips to the school, or take him to counseling, or pay for him to go to an institution. You watch your father work overtime or long years after he should retire because he is trying to pay for the bills that the younger son keeps racking up. Then when your brother does manage to get up before 11am and work for more than 10 hours one week, they act like he won the Superbowl. Meanwhile you are getting a 3.9 gpa, working 20 hours a week, lettering in 2 sports, practicing your music and going on mission trips with your youth group. Or, you are married, raising your children and trying to figure out how you are going to care for your parents because they spent all of their money on attorney fees for your brother and their years of retirement are just more years of stress, work and bills. Honestly, sometimes parents or family members overcompensate in order to buy affection and relationship.

For years I was the only grandson on one side of the family. Then due to a divorce and remarriage I got a step-cousin and my grandparents got another grandson. Mind you, these were my grandparents and I was there one and only grandson. So that summer when I went out to visit them it was a bit disorienting to have this guy in my grandparents’ house, sleeping in what had been my bed, and doing things with them that I had always done. I thought I was doing kind of ok with that, until I discovered all of the stuff that my grandma bought him. She never bought me stuff like that. This was the grandma that literally bought me underwear as my Christmas present one year. That was it. And now, she is lavishing all kinds of gifts on this new

guy who talks her into buying whatever he wants including the record albums of Black Sabbath, Three Dog Night and Deep Purple. What just happened to my grandma? What on earth! In a similar way, the older brother was now supposed to make room in his life for his estranged brother and he was supposed to be happy about it. Not so fast.

In that moment, the lava that had been building and boiling in the heart of the older brother found a weak spot on the surface. The party was too much and the son exploded and refused to go in. He would not pretend that what his brother had done was okay. His brother had been so wrong and this was not how he should be rewarded.

The older brother was angry. Why? Was he angry at brother? Was he so angry that he refused to acknowledge that he was back, or refuse to forgive? Actually, he was angry at his father. That is clear from v.29. Look at what he says to his dad. *Look, these many years I have served YOU, and I never disobeyed YOUR command, yet YOU never gave ME a young goat, that I might celebrate with MY friends. But when this son of YOURS (not my brother) came, who has devoured YOUR property with prostitutes, YOU killed the fattened calf for HIM!* This is like an accounting ledger. Let's add up all of the things that he has done and what do we have? We have a big fat debt. Now let's add up all of the things that I have done and what do we have? We have a significant profit. So, what do you do for the big fat debt? What does he get for hiring whores? You throw a party. What do I get for faithfulness? Nothing! Not even a goat.

So, why did the opportunity for mercy become such an occasion for self-pity. Because it wasn't fair. Beloved, that really is the point, isn't it? The father was not fair. He was merciful and he was asking his older son to embrace his mercy. But the older son was not willing to see it that way. Underneath his self-pity was his self-righteousness. The older son was angry at his father because he was comparing his righteousness to his brother's and his father was not giving him the credit, he thought he deserved, nor the punishment his brother deserved.

Look again at the beginning of v.28. *But he was angry and refused to go in.* What just happened? The obedient son, just became disobedient. This is shocking. That morning, he, the older son, the esteemed one, the executor of the estate, the power of attorney, the heir apparent, left the house to go to work, like he did almost every morning. He was the insider. He was the next in line. He was the one who made his father proud. He was the one who would keep this place going and provide stability for the enterprise. There were a number of people who worked here and they depended on the older son to stay the course and not ruin the family business. But now, the insider is on the outside and the one who was on the outside is now on the inside. Why is he on the outside? He is on the outside of the house because he is outside of his father's heart.

Self-righteousness blocks the path and blinds him to the door of the heart of mercy. The older son compares his righteousness to his brothers and comes up justified in his own mind. But there is another matter to consider and take to heart. The same father who was looking for the younger son, now came looking for the older brother. The flock wasn't complete with 99, there was another one, lost who needed to be found. The 9 coins were not complete. There was

another one that needed to be found. And now, party was not complete. Even though one of the sons had come home another was missing. So, the father left the party that he arranged in order to reconcile his older son to himself that he might be reconciled to his brother. Some days you are the younger brother. Some days you are the older brother. But on every day, you have a Father who has come to bring you home.

3. **Another occasion for mercy.** (31-32)

What do see in the father's words in verses 31 and 32. Better yet, what do you feel or not feel? This is a very intimate conversation that would normally take place away from prying eyes and ears, but Jesus brings us right into it so we don't wonder, what that was about. Oh no. And what is so amazing, at least to me is that the same mercy that the father showed the younger son is now given to the older son. He could have lit into him for embarrassing him and for being unwilling to go in and for making a scene and for letting everyone know that he is not pleased. He could have shamed him or tried to put him on a guilt trip for being a terrible older brother. And he could have played the dad card, the boss card and ordered him to go in, but he did none of that. Instead, he is going after the heart of this son too. And notice how he does it. He tenderly and affectionately emphasizes his relationship with the older brother and all of the resources that are the older brothers as the basis and framework for how the older son can embrace his brother. Your relationship with me, frees you to be merciful to your brother. You want a goat, a fattened calf? They're yours. What I have is yours.

When an estate is being divvied out, there are often a lot of family problems that come as a result. And you know that there are many reasons for that. But what if the amount you were inheriting was so great that it was impossible for you to spend? Would it really matter if someone else got some of the inheritance too?

What is the point of the story? The point is not our righteousness (older brother) but the father's mercy. Our father is rich in mercy. The fact that he is merciful to your brother does not take away mercy and generosity to you. Oh no. The fact that he is merciful to your brother just means that there are more people to dance with at the party.

4. **The unfinished story**

Jonah was miserable. The very thing that he feared was happening. He had preached and the people of Ninevah had repented and God did not destroy them and Jonah was angry. So, God asked him about it. The book of Jonah is the only book in the Bible that ends with a question mark. God asked Jonah about his mercy and the story is left unanswered. The same thing happens here. What is the older brother going to do? Jesus leaves it this way so that you can finish the story. So, how are you going to finish the story? The way you finish the story depends on if the heart of the Father matters to you. Here is what we need to think about.

- Who did the younger brother sin against? Clearly, the father.
- Who bore the brunt of the shame and dishonor? The father.

- Who was prepared to forgive the younger brother? The father.
- If the Father could forgive him, why can't you?
- If you are unwilling to forgive, then you end up in the very place that you resented your brother for.
- Where is the justice in the father's forgiveness? It is on the cross.
- Why does Jesus tell this story and these stories? He is telling us what the Father is like.
Matthew 11.27-28
- His forgiveness is perfect and instantaneous. We follow that, but not perfectly.
- God showed mercy to me, an enemy of his – Romans 5.10.