April 11/12, 2009

Facing Death

Facing our Stuff: Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits

Luke 15:11-32

Pastor Bryan Clark

We believe Jesus was God in the flesh. He died on the cross for the sins of the world, was buried and rose again. We often say that Jesus, once and for all, conquered sin and death. Well what do we mean by that? What do we mean by that statement, "Jesus conquered death"? Paul writes to the Corinthians, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" One might respond, "*Just about everywhere I look, now that you ask.*" We live in a world filled with suffering and death and dying. So what do we mean that Jesus *conquered* death?

It's very important to understand that the Bible talks about two different kinds of death. There is the death we all see and understand**--**physical death. But there is a greater, more significant death that the Bible refers to as *spiritual death*, more significant because it is a death that will last forever. One of the ways to think about the relationship between physical death and spiritual death is to think about the fact that all of us are in a process of dying. We see all around us the reminders that there is such a thing as death. And we know whether we live 20 years or 50 years or 70 years or 90 years, we're still in a process of dying. Think of that as God's warning shots, constantly reminding us that there is yet a greater death, spiritual death, and if that death is not dealt with before we die physically, we will be spiritually dead forever.

That raises the question, "Who is spiritually dead? Who is spiritually alive?" Jesus said that He came to seek and to save those who were lost. "Okay, who are the lost? Who is it that needs to be found?" If you have a Bible, turn with us this morning to Luke 15, a familiar story, often referred to as *The Prodigal Son*. I think a better name could be something like, "A Father and His Two Sons". But we need to start with verses one and two of chapter 15 to set the context for Jesus' story.

> **Now all the tax-collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."** (*NASB, Luke 15:1-2)

If you've read through the Gospels, this is a very familiar scene. As a matter of fact, the verb tenses here would say that sinners and tax collectors were constantly coming to Jesus. And it consistently irritated the religious crowd. The scribes and the Pharisees would be the religious elite and they would stand off to the side and grumble and wonder*, "Why would Jesus spend time with such people?"*

You might say there are three characters as we open this chapter. There's Jesus; there are the sinners and there are the religious elite. Jesus then launches into three stories, "The Lost Sheep", "The Lost Coin" and we pick it up in verse 11:

> **And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me ' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that**

country and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him." (vs. 11-16)

The father had two sons, a younger son and an older son. In the typical Jewish home the older son would get two-thirds of the inheritance; the younger son would get one-third. We know from the Jewish literature it was considered to be very inappropriate for a son to ask for the inheritance before the father's decision to give it, typically right before death. But, going against conventional wisdom, the selfish younger son demands his third. The text says he leaves to go to a distant country. We might say to a place *where the grass is greener;* it's the same idea there. He wanted to get away from home; he wanted to get away from the rules and the restrictions and he wanted to *live*. As long as he had his money, he had friends, and I'm sure he *partied it up*. But it wasn't long until the money was gone. Then the friends were gone and then he found himself in a miserable state: hired on to help feed pigs, finding himself longing to eat the food that the pigs ate.

Now I don't suppose that the young son got up one morning and said, "*I think I'll ruin my life today.*" I think he honestly believed this was the way to happiness. This was the road that would lead to fulfillment. He decided, in essence, to become his own savior, to be his own god, to save his own life, to get away from the limitations at home and to live it up a little bit because he was convinced life was better *out there*.

I don't think anybody gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'll ruin my life today." But the fact of the matter is there are probably quite a few younger sons here this morning. You've decided you, too, are going to run your own show; you're going to be your own savior; you're going to call your own shots; you're going to do as you please. Nobody's going to tell you what to do, not your mom or dad, not your boss, not religion, not God Himself, because you're absolutely convinced that's the way to be happy. That's what's ultimately going to *deliver the goods.*

So let me ask you a question this morning. Honestly, "How's that working for you? Pretty happy are you? Seeing all your dreams fulfilled? Living it up everyday? Couldn't be happier?" You know, over the years, it doesn't really surprise me that younger sons take this path. I can understand that. What surprises me, even yet after all these years, is how many are unwilling to admit that they're miserable. They're so determined to convince themselves this is the right way that even when they find themselves eating with the pigs, they're still trying to convince themselves and others, "Hey, I'm living it up!"

One of the shows I like to watch on television is "Survivor Man". On one occasion he and a friend of his are supposedly lost somewhere in the forest and they get themselves intentionally lost so that a search and rescue team can practice finding them and rescuing them. So, after they're lost for a certain amount of time, the search and rescue team is launched and, really in amazing fashion, in a very short amount of time, they find them. As they're loading up, survivor man makes the statement that many people, even after being lost for many days in the forest, when the rescue team finds them, will still not admit they were lost. And then he says something, I think, very perceptive. He says it's that very attitude that got them lost in the first place.

How many younger sons have made their lives miserable? It may include alcohol; it may include drugs; it may include any number of destructive ways to cope on a daily basis, but they're unwilling to say, "*This was the wrong path*!" Thankfully, the younger son had more sense than that.

Verse 17:

> **"But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." '**
>
> **"So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."** (vs. 17-24)

The young son determines that back home, even as a hired man, he would live better than he was living among the pigs. So he rehearses this speech that he's going to deliver when he gets home. Clearly, for whatever reason, the son never really understood the compassionate heart of his father. And so he determined his father would not take him back, other than perhaps as a hired man or even as a slave. So he begins his journey home. But, before he can get home, his father spots him a long way off and, in what we would refer to as culturally shocking behavior, his father ran to meet his son.

Culturally shocking, because even though that behavior may not shock us today, you have to understand, for the first century listener or the first century reader, that behavior was completely inappropriate. That behavior was completely unexpected, to the point of being scandalous. In an authoritative culture the father was expected to stay home and his son would have to grovel, make his speech, and over a period of time, perhaps earn his way back into some level of family relationship. The response of the father is totally unexpected. The father runs to meet his son. His son starts to deliver his prepared speech and the father doesn't even take time to listen. He wants the best robe thrown on him; he wants sandals for his feet; he wants the family ring put on the finger of his son meaning, "*You're once again my son!*" And they kill the fatted calf. A Jewish family would have eaten meat once or twice a year. This would have been an exceptional moment. This grand reunion as the father embraces his son, "He was dead! Now he's alive! He was lost! Now he is found!"

There's no question the younger son represents the sinners and the tax collectors of verse one. It's no wonder they spent so much time with Jesus, because they found in Jesus this heart of compassion that longed to embrace them and offer them forgiveness. But of course the story's not over.

Verse 25:

> **"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years**

I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'" **(vs. 25-32)**

The older brother is out in the field doing his duty and he hears the sounds of a party, comes in and wants to know what's going on. The servant tells him, I'm guessing pretty excitedly, that this is a great occasion. His brother has come home and his father has received him back and he's having a party to celebrate. But the older son is angry and he won't go in. So, once again, the father goes out to meet an estranged son and he pleads with him. He begs him to come in, to join the party. In very disrespectful terms the older son says, *"Now look, I have served you dutifully, faithfully. All my life I've kept the rules; I've kept every commandment; I've done everything you've asked. You've never thrown me a party; you've never had a celebration for me."* And he absolutely refused to go in.

It's interesting how this story ends. It doesn't really conclude; it just stops. At the end of the story the older brother is still on the outside, unwilling to go in. It looks very much like verses 1 and 2. The father had two estranged sons. One was estranged because he was very bad. One was estranged because he was very good. Both sons estranged, the father had to go out to meet them both. The older son was very clear. He had not served his father because he loved him. He had not been motivated by his relationship with his father. He'd been motivated by a sense of duty, a sense of obligation, because deep in his heart he wanted his loot, just like his younger brother.

Both brothers decided to be their own saviors, one by being really bad, one by being really good. Both were estranged from the father. I find myself wondering if the younger son didn't leave home because he just couldn't stand one more day with his older brother, one more critical look, one more judgment, one more day of his brother looking down on him. He couldn't take it, so he left.

Churches are filled with older brothers; many, many, many younger brothers have fled the church. They couldn't take it anymore. They couldn't take the criticism; they couldn't take the judgment; they couldn't take the self-righteousness. So they flee and, in the process, they think they're fleeing Christianity because they think the older brother represents Christianity. He does not; he does not! The older brother represents religious *moralism*, self-righteousness. Jesus is represented by the father. The father represents Christianity. It is something wonderful.

Over the years I've noticed that on Easter Sunday there is an attraction for both the younger sons and the older sons, but for very different reasons. Often times the younger sons come because somebody drags them. They're not really sure they want to be here. But some younger sons come because, deep down in their hearts, there is still a flicker of hope, where they want to believe that even though they've made a mess of their lives, it's possible that God could still want them.

What a joy it is to know that no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done, all you have to do is take one step toward God and God comes running, like the father, to embrace you and forgive you and welcome you home. He longs to do that.

The older brothers come for a different reason. They come because they have to. I mean, where else would the older brother be on the biggest religious holiday of the year? You have to be in church on Easter Sunday. It's part of the requirement; it's part of the duty. You're going to check it off the list. But if the older sons were to be honest, they're not here because of a passionate love relationship

with the Savior. They're here because it's part of *being good*. They are driven by a fear based, compliant way of life. They are here out of religious tradition---because that's part of what it means to be good.

The father had two sons that were estranged: One by being really bad, one by being really good, both, in essence, seeking to become their own savior. But, interestingly enough, the story ends with the younger son, at some point, recognizing the foolishness of his way and embracing the father. But the older son, in his goodness, still remains outside. It looks very much like verses one and two. Sadly that may, at the end of the day, be the truth.

There are two ways to become your own savior. One is by being bad; one is by being good. Those who choose the path of the younger son often hit a point of brokenness and decide that eating with the pigs isn't really where it's at and, in brokenness, they come home. The lost is found; they know they need a Savior. But sadly, at the end of the day, often times it's the older brothers that stay on the outside because, in their goodness, they have convinced themselves they can be good enough. They can be their own savior. Yet the Bible is very clear that no one can be good enough; no one can be their own savior. Who's lost? We're all lost! We all need to be found. Who's spiritually dead? We're all spiritually dead and can only be made spiritually alive through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

The fact of the matter is, this morning; the death of Jesus on the cross is a historical fact. The resurrection of Jesus, the empty tomb, it is a historical fact. The only question mark we're left with this morning is, "Who will embrace the Savior?" Every single person in this room will face physical death; we're all in the process of dying. But it's only when you have dealt with spiritual death and, through Jesus as Savior, been made spiritually alive, that you are rightly prepared to face physical death. Those who have been made spiritually alive know that physical death is simply now the transition from this world to the paradise to come. Death is no longer the victor. Death no longer is the winner to those who have embraced Jesus as Savior.

> *Our Father, we're thankful this morning that Jesus came to be the Savior of the world. Lord, in this audience this morning, there are younger brothers and there are older brothers, those avoiding You by being bad and those avoiding You by being really good. Lord, this morning You are calling to their hearts to come, to embrace the Father, to acknowledge a need for a Savior, to experience spiritual life now and forever. Lord, my prayer is that no one would walk out these doors this morning without embracing the Savior who loves them. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2009 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

April 11/12, 2009

Study Questions

Facing Death

Facing our Stuff: Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits

Luke 15:11-32

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Describe the lost people around you?

2. What is the significance of Jesus' resurrection as it relates to both physical death and spiritual death?

3. Who needs a Savior? In what ways today do people try to deny the need for a Savior?

Bible Study

1. Read Luke 15:1-2. What is the context for the stories that follow in Luke 15?

2. Read Luke 15:11-32. Who are the main characters in the story and who does each represent?

3. Describe the path of the younger brother in modern day terms? Who is this person today?

4. Describe the older brother in modern day terms. Who is this person today?

5. This is the story of two sons, both estranged from the father; one by being bad and the other by being good. At the end of the story the younger son has repented and is embraced by the father but the story ends with the older son still estranged. Why?

6. In what way does religion allow us to think we can be our own Savior?

7. Can we as Christians become *older son-like* in our judgment of those who take the path of the younger son? Do we find ourselves thinking God owes us because of our "goodness" compared to the "badness" of the younger sons around us?

Application

1. Before you came to Christ as Savior were you more like the older son or the younger son? What brought you to a point of recognizing your need for a Savior?

2. Using the father as our example, how should we respond to both the older sons and younger sons around us? Which is harder for you to respond correctly to? Why?

3. What can we do to be like the father and not end up like the older son? What does this look like in practical everyday terms?

Copyright 2009 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.