

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Older Son*

SERIES: *Tell Me A Story...*

SCRIPTURES: *Luke 15*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Henri Nouwen*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you. Want to say welcome to all of you here in this room and to those of you gathered on-line, at home, tuning in to the live stream.

We're in this series called "Tell Me A Story..." (**Series Graphic**). A couple of weeks ago we talked about the significance of storytelling. How stories engage our hearts and our minds. They invite us into an experience. Which is why Jesus often taught his followers by telling stories.

And so, we're taking a closer look at a story that Jesus told about the nature of God's Kingdom...the Parable of the Prodigal son. Each week we're taking a look at the various characters within the story and seeking to find ourselves in their story.

And again just a reminder for more on this parable, I'm using as one of my primary sources a book called "The Return of the Prodigal" by Henri Nouwen...whose own understanding of this parable was impacted by a Rembrandt painting (**IMAGE OF PAINTING**). Rembrandt's painting is the image that you see on the screen behind me.

Last week we spent some time focusing on **the younger son** (HIGHLIGHT YOUNGER SON). I suspect most of us, when we come to the story of the Prodigal son...think of

ourselves as the prodigal. We've made a mess of life and end up lost or broken and seeking our way home.

But today I want to consider a different character in the story...**the older son** (HIGHLIGHT OLDER SON)...and find ourselves in the shoes of the older son.

So let's take a moment and look at...

I. The Older Son's Story

If you have your Bible turn to Luke 15 and we're gonna pick up the story in verse 25 today. While you're turning there, just as a matter of context, the younger son had run off and taken a chunk of the family inheritance, which was kind of like a slap in the face to the family. Then he wasted that wealth in lavish or extravagant living. So the younger son, returns home, but rather than some kind of punishment or payback...the family is throwing a huge celebration in his honor. The older son is not yet aware that all of this taking place...so...

Luke 15 - ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. It's late in the day, most of the workers have called it quits. But the older son, the obedient, over-achiever has still been out working hard.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

Now pause here for just a moment...are you able, at this point, to put yourself in the shoes of this older child and if so, how are you feeling? Are you excited and relieved? Your younger brother had run off, he was lost, hopeless, ruined. But he's come home. Excited and relieved to have him back.

Or...or are you just a little frustrated? Your younger brother wished everyone dead and ran off, squandered the family inheritance and now he returns and they're throwing a party in his honor. You don't want to look at him. You don't want to talk to him. You don't want to have anything to do with him.

Where do you find your emotions?

This is the power of story-telling. We're invited into this experience with the older son. Let's see what happens...

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

In last week's message we were forced to wrestle with the lostness of the younger son. We said that his lostness had to do with blatant **rebellion**. He did not want someone telling him how to live his life.

This morning we must wrestle with the lostness of the older son. And the lostness of the older son is very different. The lostness of the older is **self-righteousness**.

Never run away from home or wasted his time and money on trivial or sensual pursuits. Never gotten lost in debauchery or drunkenness.

You're familiar with the older son, aren't you? Follows the rules. Toes the line. Colors inside the lines. Always made his bed. Always cleaned his room. Always got good grades. Perfectionist. Achiever. Role Model.

Which are all good things...but deep down in his heart, he began to believe that *"I am superior to others because of my own goodness or accomplishments."* That's self-righteousness.

And it begs the question...do you have any of this self-righteousness in your life?

Dallas Willard writes that, **"modern humanity lives in a rage of moral self-righteousness and that the farther we get away from the person and message of Jesus a spirit of superiority and moral distancing and condemnation marks the way that we think"**

So I thought let's just spend a few minutes this morning and talk about some of the signs of self-righteousness in our lives.

First, one of the most obvious signs of self-righteousness is...

A. The superiority complex.

Notice the older son immediately begins comparing himself and his way of life to his brother.

"All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed...but this son of yours squandered all of your wealth." Don't I deserve more than my younger brother? Aren't I better than my younger brother?

It's the superiority complex.

Jesus tells another story about this superiority complex.

Luke 18 - ⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ I go to church. I pray. I don’t say swear words.

¹³ “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.’

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I’ll take you back for a moment to Rembrandt’s painting (**PIC OF PAINTING highlighting older son**)...depicting this story. You’ll notice the figure standing off to the side, with his arms crossed and kind of sneering down at the embrace between the Father and the younger son. This image captures the essence of the self-righteous older son. Self-righteousness always has this heir of smugness or superiority about it.

I was reading a somewhat humorous story about a middle-aged guy, who went to a carnival with a group of friends and they spotted one of those mechanical bull rides that tries to buck people off. So this middle-aged guy told the bull operator that he wanted to ride. The operator looked at man’s middle-aged body and asked, “*Are you sure?*” That guaranteed the middle-aged guy was not backing down. Because that’s what superiority complex does inside of us.

So the operator explained that the bull has 12 levels of difficulty. “*It might not be easy,*” he said, “*but the key is you have to stay centered on the bull. You have to follow the bull. You have to shift your center of gravity as the bull moves.*”

So the middle-aged got on the bull and it started slow, and then it started moving faster and jostling around, he was holding on real tight. Then he remembered the operators advice, so he loosened up, and it kept moving faster and jolting and bucking and jumping. He was hanging on sideways. His arms were flailing around all over the place, but he hung on and finally the bull slowed down and it stopped. It wasn't pretty, but he made it. He imagined how surprised the operator of the bull would be that he had triumphed. He looked over at the operator with an heir of smugness and the operator looked back...shaking his head, smiling and said, "*Nice job. That was level one.*"

(Ortberg Illustration)

There is something in the human psyche that has this same sense of superiority about ourselves. We like to think we're living life on level 12...surrounded by a whole bunch of level 1's. We divide our world up into a certain order of rank where we gain stature and approval and importance by our achievements and accomplishments and we look down on those who aren't as successful or moral as we are.

The question is, are you able to recognize the superiority complex in your life?

My culture is superior to that culture. My language is superior to that language. My title is superior to your title. My job is more prestigious than your job. My kid is more artistic/athletic/musical/obedient than your kid. My life is better than your life. I am better than you.

When you begin to believe that you are somehow superior to others because of your accomplishments and your good behavior...you can be sure that self-righteousness is lurking at your doorstep. That's the older son. That's the first marker of self-righteousness.

Second, self-righteousness also tends expresses itself in something called...

B. Irritableness.

You know what irritableness is, right?

Someone who is very quickly or easily offended, usually over something fairly insignificant. Did you notice this in the story....

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. The older son is angered so quickly he doesn’t even go inside the house to hear the whole story. This is what self-righteousness does it makes us irritable towards other people in kind of condescending way.

I’ll show you how evident this is in my own life...

There are times I get home from work. And there are dishes that need done and I think to myself I worked all day, I shouldn’t have to put dishes away.

There are times I go to a restaurant and the service is less than stellar and I begin to think, well that’s it you’re not getting a big tip from me.

There are times I’m coaching athletics and I start to believe that every call that is made is going against my team to the degree that I start yelling at the person officiating the game.

There are times I’m running late. Traffic is terrible. Somebody deliberately and arrogantly cuts in front of me and I find myself seized with a desire to gesture at them in a non-faith based way...that’s irritableness.

All these years I’ve been slaving for you God, working hard God...don’t I deserve just a little bit more. If you find yourself easily irritated by others, there’s a good chance self-righteousness is working it’s way into your heart.

The third sign of self-righteousness is an obsession with

C. Dutifulness.

Now working hard and having a sense of responsibility and productivity in life is a good thing. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. But when **tasks begin to trump relationships** it's often a sign of self-righteousness in our lives.

Do you remember what the older son was doing before he returned home?

²⁵ **“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.**

There's a sense here that he was burning the mid-night oil. “Dad will love me more, if I work harder, do more. I've been slaving for you all these years and never once disobeyed. But my younger brother, he's been rebellious, frivolous, lazy.”

At the heart of self-righteousness is a belief that a person's value is dependent on their level of productivity or accomplishments. Sometimes we call this **workaholism** in our world. Work is more important than people. I share this in many of my wedding ceremonies...but...

Have you ever discovered this about life...there never seems to be enough time in the day?

Your boss will never say, *“You've put in enough hours, we'll keep paying you, but you just head home and spend time with your family.”* The chores around the house will never stop needing done.

What this means is that something or someone, in your life, will always be left out...an event, a task, a person. Dutifulness is when we prioritize tasks at the expense of the most important people in our lives. And it's a sign of self-righteousness.

And so I'm just going to ask you to do something really practical this week...Ask the people who are closest to you (Your kids, your spouse, your family): **"Are you getting enough of my time?"** I think this is just so important for the overall well-being of your life.

Because one of the things that happens is that when dutifulness starts to rule your life you begin to **lose your sense of joy**. The older son has not had time to celebrate and laugh with his friends. He's been working. He's eliminated the joy from his life.

I work to earn a paycheck and pay the bills, not because it gives me any sense of fulfillment or purpose in life. I can't enjoy time off, because I'm not being productive in those moments. I parent begrudgingly, because I have to, not from a place of servanthood to my kids. Every load of laundry or dirty dish is an annoyance. I go to church because that makes me a good Christian, not because I'm in tune with God and enjoying the fellowship of God's community. I give a tithe not out of a generous heart, but because the rule says you're supposed to and I'm following the rule.

The duty filled life of the older brother is joyless journey through life.

Finally, this superiority complex almost always leads to

D. Us vs. Them

Did you pick up on how much the older brother separates himself from his younger brother? It's subtle but so crucial to understanding the story. He doesn't refer to his brother as "my brother" but instead what does he say?

"This son of yours..."

In other words, *"Dad, you might still consider him part of the family, but he's not my brother any more."* His sense of superiority has caused him to disown his brother.

He has divided his world up into us vs. them. And folks we do this exact same thing...dividing our world into categories of people who are acceptable and those who aren't. If that's how you see people in your world, you can be certain self-righteousness is lurking.

We tend to think *“People like this they're my kind of people. I like these kinds of people. But people in that category over there, no so much.”*

But all people matter to God...there is no us and them. Rebellious younger sons matter to God. Depressed people. Educated people. Divorced people. People with different politics from yours. They matter to God. Conservative people and liberal people. Muslims. Athiests. New Age people. Every color skin. Asian people. Hispanic people. Caucasian people. African American people. Gay People. Old people. People matter to God. Every one of them.

Our sense of superiority often drives a wedge between ourselves and others...we tend to disown people who we think don't meet our standards.

And I'll just add, this self-righteousness is a chronic human problem, but it tends to be especially true for religious people, people of faith. Because when we start trying to follow God, we start thinking, “well I'm doing better than all those people who aren't.” These are the signs of self-righteousness.

So let's talk for a minute about

II. The Older Son's Return...?

First, we need...

A. Self-awareness

You'll notice in the bulletin we have the Older son's return...but with a "?". Why?

Well, it's because the story does not tell us what happens with the older brother. We do not know how his story ends.

It makes me wonder if Jesus was suggesting that "self-righteousness" is more dangerous than outright disobedience.

The tricky thing with self-righteousness is that it's so hard for us to see it in ourselves. The older brother wasn't aware that he was lost. He thought he was home all along.

This should be a sobering thought for all of us.

I think I've shared with you that I've read a number of books by a young man named Shaine Claiborne this year. A number of years ago Shane decided he was selling all he had to go and live with the poor in inner city Philadelphia. And he writes...

"People always ask if I'm aware of the danger of living in downtown Philly...(we might say among the rebellious younger sons of the world). I always remind them that the danger of comfort and complacency associated with wealth and control is often far more dangerous." We might say the danger of comfort and complacency associated with self-righteousness is far more dangerous.

The Younger brother hit rock bottom. He was almost completely out of options. He knew he needed saving. The older son did not know that he was even lost...was not aware that he too needed to return home.

Self-awareness will be crucial in overcoming your own self-righteousness. Second, you must place

B. The Father's love over personal achievement.

The older son's world is built around his personal achievement. Self-help righteousness.

"I've been slaving for you. I've never disobeyed your orders. I thought that would make you love me. But now it seems, you love my younger rebellious brother more than me. What do I have to do to earn your love?"

What he hasn't realized is that he does not need to earn the Father's love...he just needs to accept the Father's love. You can't overcome self-righteousness by your own will power or achievement. You need to accept the Father's love.

Just as the Father went out to meet his younger son when he returned, he goes out to meet his older son. God comes looking, searching, chasing after the self-righteous lost. And this is really powerful. He says, **"My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours."**

The Greek word for son that Luke uses here is the word **"teknon"** and it is an intimate and affectionate word. It literally means, **my child**.

Nouen goes on to clarify, ***"The harsh and bitter reproaches of the older son are not met with words of judgment. The father does not comment on the elder son's behavior. The father moves directly beyond all evaluations to stress his intimate relationship with his son when he says: "You are with me always." The father's declaration of unqualified love eliminates any possibility that the younger son is more loved than the elder. The father has shared everything with him. He has made him part of his daily life. "All I have is yours," he says. There could be no clearer statement of the father's unlimited love for his elder son. Thus the father's unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally to both his sons."*** (pg. 80)

The superiority complex so rampant in our world, makes us believe that we need to earn our value and love. And run ourselves ragged trying to be good enough through personal achievement. It's how our world ranks people. It's the mode of self-righteousness.

When Jenny was little she received a stuffed animal from her parents. A little blue elephant. She named him Peanut. When she first got Peanut he was brand new, fluffy, soft, bright. He smelled fresh and clean. He was worthy of love. She took Peanut everywhere she went and every night Peanut snuggled her as she fell asleep. Jenny loved this little stuffed animal.

But over time, Peanut slowly began to wear out. His bright blue faded, his fluffy fur became matted and rough and he no longer smelled so fresh and clean. You might think he had lost his loveable-ness.

But Peanut still exists today. Peanut still lives in our house. There are times we've even gone through our house and gotten rid of things that are no longer worthwhile. But that little blue elephant still has home because Jenny still loves that little thing. And if you would meet Peanut today, you would kind wonder why something so tattered and worn could be so loved. It's because Jenny's love isn't dependent on Peanuts bright, clean exterior...righteousness.

I think sometimes we get the idea in our world that our tatteredness makes us unlovable. And so, **we spend our lives trying to prove our beauty and worth.**

But what the Father was trying to help is older son realize is that God doesn't love you more because of your bright, clean exterior. He knows all about you. He knows the good and the bad. He knows all the things that make you lovable and all the things that make you unlovable. He knows your deep dark secrets...and He absolutely loves you.

The path to overcoming self-righteousness is accepting the father's love over our personal achievements.

And then finally, as we seek to overcome self-righteousness...

C. Do something that brings you joy.

Remember self-righteousness often leads to living life out of a sense of duty. Life becomes a grind. The older brother was resentful and irritated. He refused to go and join in on the celebration, the music and the laughter. He was missing out on joy.

What did Jesus say, **“I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.”**

Make room in your life this week for joy and celebration. This can happen in two ways:

Sometimes this means **reevaluating the tasks in your life** that need done and how you allow your mind to think about them.

Look the dishes still need to be done. But perhaps you need re-think your approach to the dishes. Dishes can be an irritant or an opportunity to express the sacrificial love of Jesus for the most important people in your life. The mindset you have matters.

You still need to go to work...but perhaps you need to re-think your approach to work. If your job has just become simply a paycheck or a duty. Take some time this week to think about *“Why are you doing what your doing? What talents or passions has God placed in you that led you to this particular job? How do you want your work place to be different because you there?”*

Then second, sometimes finding joy means **“setting aside a task” to do something joyful.**

Play a board game. Eat your favorite meal. Go for a bike ride. Read a book. Meet a friend for lunch.

As you do may experience the unconditional joy, the goodness and the contentment offered by the Father once again.