

The Gospel for Conformists

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[0 : 00] Well, a warm welcome this afternoon to the Tron's lunchtime service. It's great to have you with us. It's great to hear that buzz of conversation before we start as well. Relationships built and friendships built, I hope. Hopefully you'll be able to stay afterwards for tea and coffee, perhaps a sandwich, and carry on that chance to get to know each other better.

But before we look at the Bible in a moment, let's begin with a prayer. Dear Lord and God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father who sent him out of love for us, we pray that in the next few minutes you would impress on our minds and our hearts the depth of your love for us, the depth of your forgiveness and of your care, that we would be refreshed and delighted by a realization of just how much you have loved us and how much you have shown your love for us. And we pray that as we go out about our different activities this afternoon and for the rest of the week, that that realization of your great goodness would always be with us. Amen.

Now, we're in our second week looking at probably the most famous of all of Jesus' parables, the parable of the prodigal son. You'll find that on page 874 of the Bibles in front of you in Luke 15. Page 874.

That's page 874, Luke 15. I'll read verses 1 and 2, and then I'll skip on to verse 11.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. And he said, There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me. And he divided his property between them.

[2 : 50] Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. And no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hard servants have more than enough bread? But I perish here with hunger.

I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hard servants. And he arose and he came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this, my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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 was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and treated him. But he answered his father, 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 came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, Son, you are always with me. And all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this, your brother was dead and is alive.

He was lost and is found. Now, last week, we talked about how the world is full of two kinds of people, rebels and rule keepers, people who break the rules and those who keep them.

[5 : 54] Last week's half of the story shows how God rescues dramatically and forgives dramatically the rebels of this world. The younger brother in this parable who so mistreats his father. This week's, on the other hand, shows us how he rescues and forgives the rule keepers too. That his gospel is for them just as much.

You'll remember from those first two verses, and as we heard last week, Jesus told this story to Pharisees and scribes. In other words, the religious people, the good people, the people of high moral standards of his days. You know, today when we hear the word Pharisee, we think of a pantomime villain.

And in those days, people would have thought, these are the upstanding, decent people, the people who really not only live out good lives themselves, but want others to live them out as well.

And they were objecting to the way Jesus welcomed people who were sinners, who were rebels.

And we heard about that younger son, how he was a rebel. He rebelled against his father, took his money, wasted it. But when he came home, his father welcomed him with open arms, took the son's shame on himself and rejoiced he was home. But even though that is the main part of the story we usually think about, it is not the end of the story. It is a story, as we've already said, about two sons. There was a man who had two sons. And much of the point of what Jesus was saying is in the second half. That is the sting in the tail of this parable. It's about the older son, the boy who stayed home, who worked hard, never rebelled. This is the gospel of Jesus for conformists, for decent people with upstanding lives. We're going to look at it in three sections. Firstly, up to verse 28, we're thinking about the broken relationship this son has with his father. Then 29 to 31, we'll see how that relationship is broken because it's based on earning favor with his father rather than a natural relationship of love.

And then finally, we'll see the father who offers a restored relationship in verse 31. So firstly, that broken relationship in 12 to 28. Even from the very beginning of this story, there is clear there is something wrong with this older brother's relationship with the father.

[8 : 32] When the younger brother, right at the start in verse 12, says, divide the property, the older brother's nowhere to be seen. You know, he's not speaking up and saying, no, no, that doesn't seem quite right. Can't we work this out? And not only that, but when the father does split it in verse 12, it says, he divided his property between them. It doesn't say he sold part of his property and gave it to the younger brother. He said he divided his property between them. In other words, he's dividing all he has and giving the inheritances to both these sons at the same time. And this older brother doesn't step up and say, oh no, dad, I'm perfectly happy to wait till, you know, well, till we lose you. But for now, I'm happy and content. He, no hint of that at all. He takes the money and carries on.

Now, that is just a hint for us that something's wrong, but it does show us what's to come. Because when the younger brother comes home and hugs, the father hugs him and starts that feast, the older brother has been in the fields all day. He's been working hard, presumably on the farm.

He doesn't know what's happening back home. Presumably he'd forgotten his mobile that day. So the first he knows of anything is when he's on the way home and he hears the music drifting across the fields. It's music for celebration. It sounds like a dance. There's a big party at home. And he hadn't expected that. So he calls one of the young servants near the door and says, what's happening? What's this celebration for? And he's told, your brother has come home. You remember the brother you lost years ago who left home? He's come. And your father has killed the fattened calf because he's received him back safe and sound. So he hears his brothers come back.

And he hears how his dad is so delighted to have his son back. He's killed the fattened calf. He is throwing the biggest possible party in celebration. His son's back safe and whole and healthy. He wants to share the joy of that with all his friends, all his neighbors, and all his family.

But the older son is angry. He won't go in. He's not even going to go in and chat this over with his dad. He's not going to say hello to his brother. He stands outside. He wants to make this a scene.

[10 : 59] You know, any argument you have to have outside a building is generally a bad one. You know, let's take this outside is not a good sign in the course of a discussion. This man is really angry.

He wants to make a thing out of this. Just like his younger brother had cut himself off from his dad by leaving home. So he's putting a wedge between himself and his father and his family by saying, I'm not coming into this party. I'm not coming into this house. You come out here. You sort it out.

And let's remember, Jesus is telling this story to the Pharisees and the scribes. They are people who are angry. They're grumbling about Jesus receiving sinners. And at this point in the story, they can tell that he has a point here. He is getting at them straight and clear.

The surprising thing is what the father does. He leaves his party. He goes out in front of everyone with all the embarrassment that would have in it. And he goes out to talk to his son. You know, that would be a bit embarrassing in our culture. But in that time and place, people don't disagree with their fathers in public. But he goes out. He begs him. He entreats him. He says, you know, come in. Let's welcome your little brother. He's come back. Let's make the family whole again.

And he doesn't. And then, at this point, we see exactly what is wrong with the relationship.

[12:35] Because in verse 29, this brother, older brother, begins to talk to his father and tell him the reasons for his anger. He has been treating his relationship with his father like that of an employee to an employer.

And he's seeing his brother, who isn't being treated like the lazy, good-for-nothing employee he is, who should be getting his final paycheck and a kick out the door.

And he's angry. Look at that reply in verse 29. Look, these many years I've served you, I have never disobeyed your command. In other words, I've worked. I'm a servant. I've worked hard. I've fulfilled my job. Everything on the job description has been ticked off. I haven't ever disobeyed your commands.

He's a conformist, certainly. He's a decent person. He paid his dues. But what's his problem? You never even gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. He sees himself as a worker, so he wants his wages. And he hasn't had them. He wants a young goat so he can celebrate with his friends. This boy doesn't want a party with his father. He doesn't like his father. He wants to go somewhere else and have a nice party with his friends. That's what celebration really means for him. In other words, his relationship with his father is just as broken as the younger son's was.

The younger son had taken money and left home so he could go and have parties with friends. This son, this older son, has stayed home and worked hard so he can get a nice young goat and leave his father and go and have a party with his friends. They're exactly the same on the inside.

[14:27] They go about it very different ways, but they have the same problem and the same distance between them and their father. And it hasn't worked out for him, has it? So he's angry.

When this son of yours came, he's speaking as if he's not even part of the family. You know, if this isn't my brother, then are you my father? And in his rage, he goes for the weapons of self-righteous hypocrites everywhere. He goes straight for gossip and slander.

This son of yours who has devoured your property with prostitutes. You know, how does he know that? The story told us that the younger son wasted his money. It didn't say what he wasted it on, except that it was on expensive living. But this older brother seems to have friends in the CIA or something. He knows exactly what his brother's been up to in the faraway country. And he knows exactly how bad it was. This is a brother who thinks he's done everything right. But when he looks at his younger brother, all he can see is evil. Not just the evil that's there, but even the evil that might not be there. And again, remember, Jesus is telling this story to those who grumbled when Jesus welcomed sinners. He's saying, look at yourselves. You see all the sin in these people out there. But have you looked? Have you really stopped and looked at your own heart? Yeah, you've toed the line.

You've kept the rules. You're not sleeping around or taking drugs. You're not watching porn. You're not doing all the horrible things you can read about in the newspapers. But on the contrary, you've been coming to church for years. You know your Bible. You say your prayers.

Do you have a relationship with the Father? Or are you doing these things so he'll answer your prayers? Counting on him to make sure life goes okay. Maybe that's to get you into heaven when you die. Or maybe it's things in this life. Maybe when things begin to go wrong, you get that horrible diagnosis. The temptation is to say, but God, I have served you all these years and you haven't even given me decent health.

[16:36] Doesn't he owe you? Isn't that God's job? I've kept my end of the bargain up, God. Why aren't you keeping yours up? Why aren't you giving me my wages? But this is a father, verse 31, who still offers a restored relationship. You know, he could be very angry here, this father. Or he could at the very least turn this heel, go into the party and think, oh, I'll sort this out later. But he doesn't.

Son, you know, see, still love in his words. Son, you are always with me. All that is mine is yours. You know, why are you talking about goats? Everything I have, everything you can see around you, it belongs to you. It's yours. And you are with me. You know, we share what we have and we are together, which matters to me more than everything else.

And you know, it is right to celebrate your younger brother's home. We'd lost him. It was as if he was dead. But here he is back in the family with us. How can we not celebrate? In other words, come, come back in. Celebrate that we're together again. If you really are my son, if you really have a relationship with me, come share the joy I have. And we half wish the end of the story was this.

The older brother went up to his father, hugged him, said sorry, and went into the party. But it stops, doesn't it? It stops before we know what happened. And Jesus does that completely deliberately, of course. He's saying to these Pharisees, these religious teachers, these rule keepers, you write the end of the story. Because I'm writing this about you. I'm telling the story about you.

Stop looking down on these sinners. Look, you do. You work hard. You keep your religious rules. But it's like you're trying to work for God. You have no real relationship with him, no real trust or love. You want what he gives, but you don't really want to love him.

[18 : 55] Are you willing to change that and come into a relationship with him? And the diagnostic for them and for us, of course, is exactly what we think of others.

Like what he thought of the younger brother. You know, if we're out there looking down on others, thinking there are certain people who aren't God's type. And maybe we hear a story of a drug addict or a murderer repenting and becoming a Christian.

I read a little news article not so long ago about a murderer who'd become a Christian. And someone wrote in that, I just know that person can never change. People like him don't change. Or maybe you think about someone like Hitler, you know, the old question, can God even forgive someone as monstrous as that? Well, the sign we really understand the grace God offers to us is that we stop thinking about how big the sins of people over there are.

And we think, wait a second, this is a God who has all the grace to forgive me and whose grace and love are so deep that yes, he can bring back those murderers.

[20 : 09] And yes, even someone like Hitler on his deathbed, even someone like the thief on the cross when Jesus was dying, who said, despite all his lifetime of evil, remember me today in paradise.

And Jesus says, today you will be with me in paradise. That is how big the grace of God is. And we know we've got it when we look at someone who has done terrible things and think, what a wonderful God who can bring people like that and people like me, all of us home together, part of his family, celebrating again.

That's a question Jesus is putting us before us now. Not, do we pay our dues? Not, do we walk the walk? And not certainly, are we working for him?

He's saying, do we know him? Do we know his love? Do we know the depth of the forgiveness he's offering us? And are we willing to accept that? Even if we have kept the rules, do we see that in our hearts there's a problem, a problem of distance between us and our good father?

Are we willing to come back to that father? Just like the fiercest rebel, we all need to be willing, when he comes out of the party to us, to say, yes, I'll come in.

[21 : 38] I want that relationship with you. This story is a, it has no end because it is waiting for us to right that end. Will we come in to the party with him?

Jesus asks us that. Will you come in? Will you celebrate with me the grace of God that rescues sinners of every kind, rebels, rule keepers, the Lord?

Let's pray. Dear Lord, I pray that you would give us real awe at the wonder of this.

And if there is anyone here who does not know the goodness of this forgiveness and of your love and the reality of coming into a real relationship with you, I pray that they would know this now and be brought to you.

And that all of us, with great joy, would celebrate this great kindness and grace you have to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.