

June 19, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Titus 3:3-7 The Prodigal God: The Feast of the Father by Andy
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Luke 15:11-32 Then he continued, "Once there was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the property that will eventually come to me at your death.' So the father divided up his property between his two sons. Before very long, the younger son collected all his belongings and went off to a foreign land, where he squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance. And when he had run through all his money, a terrible famine arose in that country, and he began to feel the pinch. Then he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him out into the fields to feed the pigs. He got to the point of longing to stuff himself with the food the pigs were eating and not a soul gave him anything. Then he came to his senses and cried aloud, 'Why, dozens of my father's hired men have got more food than they can eat and here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go back to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have done wrong in the sight of Heaven and in your eyes. I don't deserve to be called your son any more. Please take me on as one of your hired men."'"

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still some distance off, his father saw him and his heart went out to him, and he ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. But his son said, 'Father, I have done wrong in the sight of Heaven and in your eyes. I don't deserve to be called your son any more' 'Hurry!' called out his father to the servants, 'fetch the best clothes and put them on him! Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet, and get that calf we've fattened and kill it, and we will have a feast and a celebration! For this is my son - I thought he was dead, and he's alive again. I thought I had lost him, and he's found!' And they began to get the festivities going.

"But his elder son was out in the fields, and as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants across to him and enquired what was the meaning of it all. 'Your brother has

arrived, and your father has killed the calf we fattened because he has got him home again safe and sound,' was the reply. But he was furious and refused to go inside the house. So his father came outside and called him. Then he burst out, 'Look, how many years have I slaved for you and never disobeyed a single order of yours, and yet you have never given me so much as a young goat, so that I could give my friends a dinner? But when that son of yours arrives, who has spent all your money on prostitutes, for him you kill the calf we've fattened!' But the father replied, 'My dear son, you have been with me all the time and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and show our joy. For this is your brother; I thought he was dead - and he's alive. I thought he was lost - and he is found!'" J.B. Phillips

What an incredible story!

It is filled with ethos and emotion, audacity, rebellion, conflict, joy, disillusion, and it is a cliff hanger—will that elder brother join the feast.

To tell a story of a feast, a celebration involving food and dance and the camaraderie that comes when a meal is shared was vivid imagery for the audience that first heard this story.

The people of Israel knew the feast of the father in their heritage. Each year the calendar was arranged and life was scheduled by the feasts.

Each feast simultaneously recalling God's work, some blessing from God and a looking forward to God's future blessing as well.

Each spring the Passover would be celebrated. This critical time of feasting on prescribed foods was a great time of remembering. The heritage of those who were first listening to this story we call the prodigal son was that they had been slaves in Egypt. Through chains of circumstances they had moved into slavery. They lived hopeless lives. Surrounded by false worship of false gods their everyday lives and their destiny was controlled by their masters.

Generations earlier their thoughts might have turned to freedom and their homeland, but after 400 years in Egypt the national mindset of

Israel was now that they were slaves. They saw no other future for themselves. In their slavish mindset they couldn't fix or even alter their circumstances and the truth was they were right. But God delivered them from Egypt. And now hundreds and hundreds of years later they celebrate that deliverance, they don't ever want to forget God's miraculous deliverance and so each year they observed Passover followed by 7 days of the feast of unleavened bread.

Scattered through the year there were other feasts.
Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Dedication

Yes they were familiar with the concept of a feast. But this feast of the Father is unique. It isn't a celebration of some mighty moment in national history. It isn't celebrating the harvest or some big moment of national deliverance. There aren't a bunch of traditions and rules about the feast of the Father.

But in this story we see the heart of the father.

A father just wants to see his children happy, fulfilled.

He just wants to enjoy his kids.

To just feast with his children.

I saw this modeled in my Father-in-law. For 25+ summers he sponsored beach week. Renting a condo at New Smyrna where we'd all show up and enjoy the beach for a week, and as our families enlarged eventually 3 condos were rented.

I think for a number of years I thought it was just for us. We're all a little self absorbed and I imagined that this week each summer was for us, and it was, and still is a great gift. But as I've aged and my children have become adults I now know something that it in no way lessens the gift but the weekend was also for him. It was a time to celebrate and for him to enjoy his kids.

Growing up I didn't get it. I didn't understand, from an experiential aspect why my parents, my dad would want me to come home, from boarding school or college.

Even as Vicki and I got married and our families would just want us to “come over” or “come visit” I still didn’t get it.

But now as a Dad with grown children I get it. All Dad’s want in their most God like moments is to enjoy their children.

Jesus tells this story now familiar to us to reveal to us that we have a father in heaven who wants us.

He is the father who wants us so much that he won’t force himself on us.

He wants us so much—regardless of which side of the road we ran off.

He wants us so much that he allows us to enjoy his benefits and blessings even when we don’t want him.

God wants you! What will it take to get that to sink into our heads and run down into our hearts?

Listen again to the reality of this story. There are in this story two ways to be lost, estranged from the Father.

We are most familiar with the one which is clearest—that only makes sense. That younger son kind of lostness—the rebellious heart that says I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it with whomever I choose in whatever way will please me.

Who cares if it hurts Dad?

Who cares if it damages family standing?

Who cares if it leaves others to clean up the mess?

But at its heart is a self directed life. It is a mind set that determines to find fulfillment by living as I please.

WE know from this story and from history, and from story after story after story even in secular culture that self-indulgent living will lead to eventual collapse.

The younger son rejects the authority of the father and seeks to be his own authority. And it ends in moral bankruptcy.
It is easy to see.

But there is a more subtle way to be lost. A more couth, respectable way to be estranged from the father is to stay in the fold, keep all the rules, and work really hard so we can get leverage over God.

Obey and get blessed. Meet the conditions of the promise and receive the benefit. Tow the line and then God will have to obey our demands.

Elder brother types want sanctification, and heaven, and wining, and having the truth, and being right. All the father's stuff but not the father.

So what's a dad to do? He wants both sons—the rebels and moral conformists. So what's a dad to do?

What he does is become the prodigal God.

Because of the story usually being called “The Prodigal Son” we think of the word prodigal as meaning wayward or gone astray. And of course we can't align wayward or gone astray with God.

But according to Merriam-Websters dictionary the word means “recklessly spendthrift”. It means to spend until you have nothing left.

So in a sense it is true of the younger son who blows his inheritance in a negative spending until he has nothing left. He is the prodigal son. But in another sense it is descriptive of the Father who recklessly spends all he has dividing his inheritance, and then recklessly throws open the doors to the family when the son returns. The Father, represents God's willingness to empty heaven and spend until he has nothing more to give in order to welcome us into the feast.

One last time I want to try and have us grasp the heart of this story. Too often we have offered only two options and there is a third.

What many people see and why the gospel is not embraced is that it is heard wrong.

Be bad, do your own thing, walk away from God in immoral living and a self-directed life,

Or

Be really good, conform to the moral rules, grit your teeth and obey.

We've bought into the idea of only two options. Immorality or Religion. And religion not just false Christianity, but world religions operate on some form of, "I obey—therefore I am accepted by God."

And such religion is damning. It is as hell bound a choice as blatant immoral living. But Jesus' story of the Prodigal God reveals to us the Gospel. It is something entirely different. It is something so incredible and counter intuitive and counter cultural that it is almost too good to be true.

The gospel is this simple and this profound. "I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ—therefore I obey."

Believing that—letting the Holy Spirit convict and convert us to that reality, that we are fallen and can't get up, we can't bring ourselves into a right relationship with God but believing that, accepting that Jesus sets us right is how we make a connection to God. In that moment of believing we step into a new relationship with God and a new identity in Christ.

That's the good news. But there is bad news too. The truth of this belief leaks out of us at an incredible rate. We are so marinated in sin that we can slide back into religion almost without a thought. Back to I obey therefore I am accepted.

So God has a plan. He knows the pull of sin to trust human approval, professional success, power, influence, status, identity with "our group" and so he has a plan—it is the Father's feast!

It is a focus on God.

It is a eating and drinking in of the GOSPEL over and over and over

It is deepening our understanding of the salvation of Christ.

And it is letting the Gospel reset our motivations, reset our self understanding, and reset our priorities

I love the words of Martin Luther: “The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine...most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.

For just a moment consider with me one of the greatest passage of scripture tucked away in the little book of Titus 3:3-7 Open your Bible. If you don't have a bible write down this reference and go look it up, read it re-read it, maybe memorize it. Here' what it says in the NLT>

Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient.

Maybe we've been rebellious like younger brothers or moralistic self saving elder brothers but Paul has us nailed—

Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient

We were misled by others and became slaves to many wicked desires and evil pleasures.

Our lives were full of evil and envy. We hated others, and they hated us.

But then God our Savior showed us his kindness and love.

He saved us, (Who does the saving?) He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of his mercy.

He washed away our sins and gave us a new life through the Holy Spirit.

He generously poured out the Spirit upon us because of what Jesus Christ our Savior did.

He declared us not guilty because of his great kindness.

And now we know that we will inherit eternal life.

That's the message. That is the message of Jesus Christ that will transform our lives if we stay there. We don't transform our lives He does. It is the truth of His gospel that reshapes our very idenity.

I have to say one more thing. The feast of the father is symbolic of the great feast when we sit down at the banquet table in heaven someday... but there is a place where we can get appetizers and hors d'oeuvres, we can catch the flavors of the feast, smell the aromas, and begin the feast NOW.

It is a place a group of people called the church the body of Christ.. That group is flawed, and human and sinful. That group is populated with wheat and weeds. It has the completely sincere and the abject hypocrites, but it is where we hear and re-hear the gospel. The good news that transforms us. It is this group, disfigured and handicapped as it is that seeks God, hears and proclaims and lives out the gospel—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, encouraging the despondent, educating the ignorant, loving people into life long friendship with God, not to earn brownie points or favor from God, not in some foolish attempt to put God into their debt but because they are accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ
They obey, inviting others to the feast of the Father.

You are accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ hear that good news, believe that good news, and come into the feast of the Father.