

But What About Me?

An Ordinary Time Sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton
Delivered on September 26, 2021 in the See All The People Series
My first sermon series in Geneva as Sr. Pastor

Luke 15:1-3,11-33

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3 So he told them this parable: 11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. 25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is

yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Preamble

Hi! I am Pastor Rob Hamilton and thanks for being with us today as we wrap up our series following Jesus as he compassionately sees all the people and how we have been challenged to see those in our family, friend and neighborhood networks with compassion and invite all people into a closer relationship with Jesus. During this series we've been pushed to move outside of social bounds and challenge norms to see people with compassion, we've reflected on how we are seeing and embracing children as the center of God's kingdom and even have heard the call to find healing from any blindness that might preventing us from seeing the people Jesus wants us to see. Today we end the series in a far different place than where we started. I want to conclude by recognizing that maybe we are also the ones that God sees with compassion, that you and I are part of all the people God sees. Will you please join me in prayer as we attend to our own soul work in light of this text.

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus,

We all long for your embrace. For the ways we hope to feel that embrace through your Word read and proclaimed today; we thank you. As we seek and are sought after, open our hearts, minds, and ears to what your Word says to us today. Amen.

Sermon

Today's parable sits at a tie with the parable of the Good Samaritan for being one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. And what I love about Jesus' use of parables, they are not strict allegory nor metaphor nor fable, but parable is its own literary form. Parables are like a beautiful gem and with each angle you examine them you discover new beauty. I don't know if sibling position affects how this parable is interpreted, but I suspect we all gravitate towards one character or another in this story. Maybe we connect to the father longing for a wayward child to walk a better road in life? Maybe we are an oldest sibling but find ourselves as the outcast in our families like the prodigal? You can see yourself the story at different places and in different season of your life.

For example, centuries of interpreting this story focus on God as the father and the younger brother as any old sinner have given this story the title in nearly every bible as "the prodigal son," which is appropriate from one viewing angle of

the gem. But when we consider the multiple angles to view this gem of a parable then other titles for this story become appropriate. For example, this story could be titled “The Foolish Daddy” or “The dysfunctional family” or “The Two Lost Sons” or “The disrespectful sons” or “Sibling Rivalry” or “the running father” or “Self Discovery versus Moral Conformity”— just to name a few.

But today, as we conclude our series I want to turn the parable and focus on the elder brother and his response to all the focus spent by the father on the younger brother. You see sometimes when Jesus pushes and pushes and pushes us to see others and doles out compassion to others, it can leave us thinking... ok God, but what about me and my needs? This parable about two sons can also be about that creeping desire to ask ‘God what about me?’.

To flush this out, I have decided to do a creative retelling of this story from the elder brother’s perspective, taking creative license to fill in details of the story to make the point of grace in the life of the elder brother. So go with me into this text, as I retell this parable from this imagined perspective of the elder:

“My brother and I never really got a long. Maybe when we were little we did. Those memories are too distant. When we were younger, I was always closer to my dad - I was always eager to go help dad with with the sheep or work in the field. My younger brother by 18 months was closest to mom. Life was good then. But then mom got sick. When I was 10, she died.

Suddenly, dad didn’t spend much time with me anymore, he was always with my younger brother; who was really upset over mom’s death. Now, don’t get me wrong I miss my mom. I loved her too. I’d give anything to have her arms wrap me up again; but we know that won’t happen. After mom died, dad really didn’t want to work in the field any more or tend to the sheep, he’d just comfort -and coddle- my little brother. Our servants needed direction so because I had helped my dad so much, dad sent me out to work with the servants. Which was good, I liked being outside and busy - it took my mind off of mom.

While I kinda liked taking care of the farm and the flock I’ve been growing distant from my father we stopped doing the work together. Now don’t get me wrong, I am grateful. By putting me in charge of our entire operation, my dad set me up to provide for my future and I like working hard and doing the right thing. But what I haven’t been able to understand is why my brother was never sent out to help me all of these years. I mean most of the time I could handle the work load with the servants, but when the lambs come, or during seed time or harvest, it would be nice to have some help.

I have to be honest it really started to bother me when my little brother who didn’t have to help out started to get spoiled. My little brother, who is not so little anymore, would get to go off with his friends and do whatever he wanted. Dad would always buy him whatever he wanted. My brother never had to go to bed ear-

ly or forgo a social life in order to make sure the family business was successful. It was my hard work, that was paying for his good times.

As the years went on I started buying up more pastures as the flock grew. This meant I could get away from my spoiled little brother and the shell of a man my dad had become while I was out tending the flock in our newly expanded property. Because I had become so distant from my dad and his youngest son, I was surprised when dad sent a field hand to have me bring the flock in, but I shouldn't have been. At first, I thought something had happened to my dad, he's not as young as he used to be and sometimes I wonder about his memory. But he wasn't sick, instead I was told that my father was selling off nearly half of the flock and pastures. I could only imagine what trouble my brother got into this time. Probably had to bail him out of jail or make restitution for some stupid thing he did. Turns out it was much worse. That lowlife of a brother some how convinced my dad to give him his share of the inheritance; now, before my dad was dead... can you believe the gall of this kid?

Of course I show up, ready to set my dad straight. After all, I'm the one that worked hard to make sure there is any inheritance to be had and there is my brother with this smug look on his face. My dad had already signed the bill of sale. I tried talking my dad into reversing the deal, but it was too late. I saw that my brother had his bags packed. As soon as my dad handed over my hard-earned money - I mean yes, my brother was entitled to a share of it, but he never did anything to help earn it- he just left. He didn't even thank my dad or me. I chased him down the road. I told him to go "love himself" and that if he ever came back here... I don't know what I'd do to him." He just gave me that smug smile and a one-finger wave. I can't believe my dad would do that to me. I was so mad at him, but I felt pity for him at the same time.

After my brother left, I really didn't see my dad anymore. I got busy trying to pickup the pieces of this divided estate. I figured that now that my brother had his fair share I could build up this farm and flock up real nice and it would all be for me to inherit. And so I got to work and left my dad to the care of the servants.

Once in a while, I'd ask how he was doing or visit with him. The house servants told me that after my brother left all my dad would do is worry about my brother. He spend most of his waking hours looking out the window or sitting on the porch staring down the road my brother left by. But after he left, we never heard from him, which for me was nice; but it really bothered my dad.

What really bothered me about the whole ordeal was that it seemed like my dad could never see how my brother was simply taking advantage of him and his grief. I've tried telling him that he needs to let go that son of his, it would help his mind, but he just wont listen. That's why its best to have someone caring for dad full-time. It gives me time to tend to the flock and fields. Want to know something

funny? If my brother had waited a just few years; I've got more property now then when he took his fair share. His loss. My gain.

One evening as I brought the flock in a few weeks before harvest and I thought I heard the sound of music and then I know I smelled roast beef. Did a neighbor get married? Why would the party be so close to home? I wondered. When I got home, I saw the party was at our house. I had no idea what was happening. No one told me of any plans. I hadn't been gone that long and you don't throw a party this size, with such exuberance, spontaneously. I called for a house servant, who told me that my brother came home two days prior looking all destitute and that my father was filled with joy, back to his normal self and that my father order this party and invited everyone around... that was everyone but me. I couldn't believe that guy, that son of my father! How dare he come back?! How dare my father welcome him back with a party? I couldn't believe it.

I got cleaned up but there was no way I was going to the house. I wish I could take the flock back out, but harvest is soon. That son of my father probably just needs more money... too bad! He got his fair share already! Well, now he's getting a little more, but now he's getting more of what is mine, because I'm sure this party is coming out of my share. I can't believe my dad would throw this party for him if he squandered his inheritance. I mean my dad never even tells me thank you for all the hard work I do; let alone throw me a party when I have a banner year or we don't lose any lambs.

Just as I settled in for the night, my dad came to me. The servants were right. Dad was different. He was happy. His mind seemed clearer. He stood tall and proud... it had been years since I had seen him like this; but I was so mad and hurt. All the favoritism of the past and now this party for my loser brother, but what about me? I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't even get up when my dad came to me. He tried his best to cheerlead me into the party. I refused. I know he was glad that my brother was alive, but I wish he was dead. I told him as much. I then told my dad about how it wasn't right that for years I have done all the hard work; I did everything right, even had done right by him without so much as a thank you, let alone a vacation or party of my own - while that no-good son of his stripped him of everything he had to offer, including his dignity.

My dad tried to smooth it over. Telling me that 'he hadn't lost sight of me and my hard work. That he was proud of me too, and that I've done well - all of this is mine; that he loves me just as much as that no-good son of his; and that I should be happy that my brother who we thought was dead, was alive.' I wouldn't have it. Too little, too late dad!

But then my dad said something I just don't understand. He started crying. Like his heart broke, my dad said to me "I didn't know I had lost you too. I love you son." I just ignored him and told him to go back to his party. And he left.

Later, when I my temper cooled I thought, ME? LOST? No, its that other son of his that is lost. I've been here to whole time. Doing right by him. I never brought my dad shame and embarrassment like that son of his has done. I do what's expected of me. I never get into trouble. I've worked hard at being the kind of good person that I am. Lost? Dad, you've lost your mind mind! (silence)

But you know what? Its been nearly twenty years since I heard my dad tell me "he loves me." Its been probably been just as long since I told him that I love him. And he said it tonight and I believe him. I didn't know until now, how much I needed to hear him say it. But how can I go to that party after everything that's happened. If I go, wont that just condone my loser brother's behavior?

I hate to admit it, but maybe Dad is right. Maybe I am lost. Maybe I don't get it.

But, I'm glad my didn't give up on my brother... because maybe he wont give up on me; because now I realize that dad looks at me with the same compassion as he has for the son he hasn't seen in ages. Maybe Dad also was looking down the road for me: the one who does everything right, but doesn't know how much I need to know I am loved. Loved just as much as my embarrassment and disgrace of a brother.

"Don't give up on me, Dad. I want to come home too."