

Week 3 – What’s my problem?

Rebellion

Part of expectations in the school I worked in concerned uniform. For whatever reason, pupils were not permitted to wear ‘hoodie’ tops. But there are always pupils who refuse to conform. Perhaps you were one of them at one time. I remember on a hot July afternoon stopping Zac in the corridor.

“Zac,” I said. “You know you’re not allowed to wear that hoodie in school. Anyway, it’s the hottest day of the year. You’ll pass out in a minute.”

“I won’t sir – it’s freezing,” Zac replied.

My response to Zac’s reply was not to phone an ambulance and report a suspected case of malaria. There was no doubt in my mind – Zac was not freezing on a hot July afternoon. The visible sweat on his brow combined with his reported low temperature was not due to a tropical disease. Zac’s problem was he was doing his utmost to be *a rebel*.

After Jesus told the parables of *The Lost Sheep* and *The Lost Coin*, he told a third parable.

Our concern in this chapter is to understand how we’ve got so lost. If our sense of ‘lostness’ is because we’ve wandered off from God, what does that mean? How have we wandered off from God? The problem is *rebellion*.

The problem is explained in Jesus' third 'lost' parable. This time, the thing lost was a son. It's become known as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Let's look at it bit by bit:

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 property that is coming to me.'¹

Jesus' story begins with a father's youngest son making a shocking request. A young man asks for his inheritance. The request was shocking because sons did not get their inheritances until their father's died. Essentially, the young man was saying to his father, "Dad. I wish you were dead." Any parent listening to Jesus would have understood what an insult this was. This young man wanted the money he'd get on his father's death, but he wanted it now.

Those listening to Jesus, at this point in the story, would have been on the edge of their seats. Think back to your school days. You wake up and there's snow. Enough snow to make snowballs, but not enough snow to cancel school. The children have fun. They make their way into school, enjoying hurling cold white missiles at each other. One over-excited pupil launches a snowball that goes well-wide of the intended target. Instead of hitting a like-minded mischievous twelve-year old, it hits the headteacher. What happens? Everything stops. Everyone is quiet. There's anticipation in the air. What will the headteacher do?

Those hearing the parable would have been filled with anticipation at this point. What's going to happen? How will this father react to such an unthinkable and insulting request? Perhaps the father will cut him off from the family. In those days, funeral services were sometimes held in the event of a child being disowned. So – what happens?

¹ Luke 15:11-12 ESV

And he divided his property between them.²

The father gave his son what he wanted. Jesus continued:

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.³

The son gets what he wanted. He turns his property into cash. He goes far away (perhaps to escape family friends who might rebuke him) and enjoys the good times. Again, this story would have resonated with listeners. Maybe you were a particularly rebellious teenager. Maybe you've struggled with a child of your own.

The rebellious son in Jesus' story represents the entire human race. The son had essentially said to his father, "I don't want you. I wish you were dead. I don't like anything about you. I don't want your fatherly authority over me. I don't want the standards and values imposed upon me in this household. I just want your money. I want to go as far from here as I can and live life my way."

The father's reply, "Ok – here you are. Go on your way."

Today, the human race as a whole has rejected God. In a sense, God is the Father of the human race, in that He made us. But we reject His authority. We decide what's good for us. We don't want God to tell us what's right and wrong. We're lost because, like the rebellious son in the story, we're walking away from God.

² Luke 15:12 ESV

³ Luke 15:13 ESV

The father gave his rebellious son exactly what he asked for. In the same way, God gives rebellious human beings exactly what they ask for. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul describes the rebellion of human beings. He also writes,

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness⁴

God says to rebellious human beings, “Have your own way if that’s what you’d prefer.” The truth is, we like things that we know are wrong. We are people who live in willful rebellion. We know things are wrong, but we do them anyway. We prefer our uncleanness and God has let us have it.

The younger son in Jesus’ parable is permitted to leave and engage in his reckless living. That’s where the word *prodigal* comes from. The dictionary defines prodigal as:

Spending money or using resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.⁵

The rebel son parties. We can well imagine the things he got up to. This young man represents in particular, people who are open rebels. People who boast and collect all the badges of immorality. Jesus told the story in such a way as to make the young son utterly unlikeable.

I remember a few years ago hearing an archive radio interview with the Cardiff-born children’s author Roald Dahl. He described the letters he’d received from children telling him what they liked best about his stories. He said, “Children enjoy it when bad things happen to nasty people.” The writer said he never wanted to trick children. He said, “We are not a wonderful race of people.” He didn’t want to pretend to

⁴ Romans 1:27 ESV

⁵ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/prodigal>

children that nasty people do not exist. That's why his stories always contain nasty characters. However, Roald Dahl described how, whilst the world is not a wonderfully rosy place, he always wanted to ensure that nasty people got what they deserved in his stories. He described his writing strategy:

You set out to make characters as nasty as you possibly can so that when they get 'done in' its sweeter than ever.

Jesus used that strategy before Roald Dahl ever did. Jesus has created a nasty character in the younger son. There is little to like about this spoilt, selfish, greedy, self-indulgent young man. We are anticipating the sweetness of his 'getting done in.'

Remarkably, he spends all of his money and is left with nothing. How recklessly stupid! We now like him even less.

But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.⁶

He's run out of money and to compound his situation, there's a famine in the land he's gone to. A famine means people aren't going to be big on charity.

As we hear the story, we are meant to enjoy the justice of it. We revel that the charmless man is reaping what he sowed. The Jewish audience would have revelled in the greater depths of humiliation into which he sank.

Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.⁷

⁶ Luke 15:14 ESV

⁷ Luke 15:15-16 ESV

Could there be anything more humiliating for a young Jewish boy? He's been humbled to the job of pig-feeder – so hungry, he even longs to eat their food.

The audience must have enjoyed the story. This is the Roald Dahl strategy of story-telling. This is the sweetness of the rebel getting 'done in.' Or is it...?

The audience expectation is the total humiliation of the repulsive rebel. As the story continues we see Jesus shatters that presumption!

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’”⁸

The son's situation is so desperate he decides to head for home. He knows his behaviour has been hateful. He knows he's a loathsome individual. He has an expectation that his father will never accept him back as his son. But he also knows something about his father's character and reputation. His father was a good man. His father was a man who gave his servants “more than enough bread.” His father had a reputation for being kind. If he won't be welcomed back as a son, there's a chance at least, that he'll be taken back as a servant.

The prodigal returns. Anticipation amongst Jesus' audience rises. Even the kindest father would not welcome this kind of son back. Surely now we'll get the total sweetness of the Roald Dahl moment. Foolish boy to think his father will welcome *him* back.

⁸ Luke 15:17-19 ESV

But Jesus smashes expectations -

And he arose and 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.⁹

Jesus has deliberately exaggerated the wickedness and insolence of this son. He does it to shatter our expectations of how God treats rebels. All of us are rebels. We, like this son, reject God. We don't want him to rule over us. But Jesus tells the story to teach us that wilful rebels, who boast and brag about their immorality, can return to God and be welcomed by Him.

We think the son will finally get what's coming to him. Instead, the father in the story has been looking out for him. Maybe he looked out every day. And then, one day, his obnoxious son appears on the horizon. The father runs to him because the father loves him. The rebel is welcomed home. There's a party. There's celebration.

When this parable (originally recorded by Luke in Greek) was translated into Aramaic, some translators were reluctant to use the word 'run.'¹⁰ Instead they used words like 'hastened' or 'hurried'. Middle eastern noblemen did not run. They wore long robes and to run in long robes meant lifting your robes and exposing your ankles. Ankle exposure was considered shameful for middle-eastern noblemen. The translators could not equate a shameful, undignified, humiliating act – like exposing your ankles – with God.

⁹ Luke 15:20-24 ESV

¹⁰ See John MacArthur *A Tale of Two Sons*, Grace To You 2006

But this is what Jesus' parable teaches. God rejoices when rebels repent. When those who have gone in a different direction turn around, God is eager to forgive! Such is God's eagerness to forgive he is likened to a man who runs.

Not everyone listening to Jesus' parable would have liked it. For people who think they're good, it's not great to think of immoral people getting off the hook. Why should such a fuss be made about the son who's been so rebellious, whilst his older brother gets no attention? Amongst Jesus' listeners were Pharisees. The Pharisees were devoted in their religion. They were strict. They saw themselves as good. Jesus' parable was really aimed at them.

You see, not all of us associate as people who wear immorality on our sleeves. We consider our lives to be quite clean. We might think we're more like the dutiful older son.

However, is the older son as good as he seems? Notice at the beginning of the parable, although it was the younger son who demanded his inheritance, the father gave it to both sons:

And he divided his property between them¹¹

The elder son had an appearance of being loyal because he'd stayed home. However, the reality was – he was just as rebellious.

Me – a rebel?

¹¹ Luke 15:12 ESV

Let's break for a moment and look at another parable. It's *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*. The parable was told by Jesus in response to a question.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."¹²

The lawyer in this episode is a Jewish expert in the Old Testament law. He asked Jesus about how to obtain eternal life. Jesus turns the question back on him. Jesus was saying, "You're the lawyer. You tell me. What's your interpretation?" The lawyer summarises all of the commands of the Old Testament law. The law boils down to this – "Love God. Love your neighbour." Jesus approved of the man's answer. If you want eternal life, love God and love your neighbour.

But the conversation continued...

The lawyer knew there was a problem. The law of God does not comfort us. The law of God makes us panic. The lawyer knew that whether or not he'd kept the law depended on what's meant by 'neighbour.' He wanted assurance that everything was ok. He was thinking, "If my neighbour is my fellow Jew – I'm ok. If my neighbour is my friend – I'm ok."

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"¹³

So Jesus explained with *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*.

¹² Luke 10:25-38 ESV

¹³ Luke 10:29 ESV

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

A man has been robbed and left half dead. He’s a Jew. A priest and a Levite (fellow Jews of religious vocation) pass by and do nothing to help. Perhaps they were worried the robbers were still close by. They didn’t want to be the next victim. The shock in the story is that the one person who stopped to help was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans were enemies.

The lawyer had wanted to know who his neighbour was. If it’s just my fellow-Jew, then I think I can obey God. However, Jesus’ parable taught that your neighbor included your enemies and not just your friends. Deep down, the lawyer knew this. In asking Jesus the question he’d been attempting to ‘justify himself.’

We try and do the same. We agree that certain things are wrong. But surely, we’re not rebels in the way the prodigal son was a rebel. But, in *The Parable of the Good Samaritan* Jesus exposes us. We have very narrow standards - surely it’s ok to hate your enemies. But Jesus says, my standards are wider.

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus gives examples of how his standards are wider than ours:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment¹⁴

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.¹⁵

Jesus exposes us. We are lost because all of us are rebels. None of us meet God’s standards. We narrow expectations. Jesus broadens them. The Universe God created was to be perfect in every way.

Let’s get back to *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*.

The elder son had an appearance of respectability. So might we – but we’re all equally rebellious. We justify ourselves and live by our standards, but God’s standards are far wider than ours.

The elder son was angry at the warm welcome his younger brother got.

“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’¹⁶

Notice how the elder son was no closer to his father than his rebellious little brother. He’s at home, but clueless as to why there’s a celebration going on in the house. He’s distant from his father and what’s going on at home – as distant as his younger

¹⁴ Matthew 5:21-22 ESV

¹⁵ Matthew 5:27-28 ESV

¹⁶ Luke 15:25-27 ESV

brother who'd gone far away. All of us, however outwardly respectable, are as distant and removed from God as the most brazenly immoral.

However, instead of admitting our sin, many of us think we're owed something. The elder son was angry:

But he was angry and refused to go in.¹⁷

Many of us lead good, respectable lives. But remember, God's standards are wider than ours. Our respectability masks the problem.

The elder son voices his frustrations to his father:

So he answered and said to *his* father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'¹⁸

The elder son's problem was that he was blind to his own rebellion. He could see his brother's obvious rebellion and immorality. But he was blind to the fact that he too had taken a share of his father's possessions. Is that you? Do you see wrong in other people's lives but see no wrong in your own? Are you very harsh in judging other people's behaviour – but quite lenient with yourself? The son really seems to believe that he was the perfect child.

When the elder son refused to join the celebrations, we're told that his father came out to see him:

¹⁷ Luke 15:28 ESV

¹⁸ Luke 15:29-30 ESV

But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.¹⁹

The father came alongside his angry son. He pleaded gently with him. He tried to reason with his son.

And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’²⁰

The father pleads and reasons so that his rebellious son might join the party too. We’re taught that Jesus welcomes all rebels. He welcomes the most obvious immoral who are ashamed of their pasts. He welcomes the outwardly respectful, if only they will see their guilt.

Have you ever watched a film or a television drama, where there isn’t a proper ending? You’ve been hooked, but the writer or director does not give you a clear resolution to the story. Jesus does the same in *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Did the elder son go into the party or not? We’re left hanging.

Amongst Jesus’ audience were the religious Pharisees. They were like the elder son – outwardly respectful. In ending the story in the way he does, Jesus was saying – the ending is up to you. You can admit that you are as rebellious as someone like the younger son – or like Zacchaeus – I am ready to welcome you in. Or, you can remain outside.

What about you?

¹⁹ Luke 15:28 ESV

²⁰ Luke 15:31-32 ESV

