

Spiritual transformation begins with a vision of God. How we view God largely determines the direction of our lives. If God is bloodthirsty I will be harsh and judgmental. If God is permissive then I will be lenient and permissive. The Psalmist says we become like the God we create. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, But to Your name give glory Because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth. ² Why should the nations say, "Where, now, is their God?" ³ But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. ⁴ Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see; ⁶ They have ears, but they cannot hear; They have noses, but they cannot smell; ⁷ They have hands, but they cannot feel; They have feet, but they cannot walk; They cannot make a sound with their throat. ⁸ ***Those who make them will become like them***, everyone who trusts in them." **Psalm 115:1-8**

To "lead people in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ," I need to know a person's vision of God since we become like that which we worship. So the first step in spiritual transformation is to get an accurate view of God. Last week we read about Isaiah's vision of God. He saw the Lord seated on His throne. When he recognized His holiness he came undone. He was ruined. He became painfully aware of his sin and confessed it. He said in effect, "I'm a dead man." But God graciously took care of his sin problem and restored him making him useful for service.

Today we get another vision of God. This time the vision is found in a familiar NT story that Jesus told to some Pharisees in Luke 15. There are four characters in this story, three human and one bovine! I will warn you in advance three characters in the story die. Only one clings to life.

The dying father...vv. 11-12. When this young man asks for his inheritance before the death of his father this is a sign of deep disrespect. He is saying in effect, "I wish you were dead." In fact, the word translated "wealth" is "bios." Owning land was a big deal. People rarely sell family land in the Middle-East. It is more than an asset it is part of their heritage. Your identity is tied up in your land. When you lose your land you lose your identity not to mention the fact that this man is losing a good part of his livelihood and his retirement income. In spite of the fact that this man will lose the respect of the community he obliges the son. He dies to his hopes and dreams so the son may live. This is scandalous to the original hearers but it only gets worse.

The dying son...vv. 13-20a. In order to take cash on his journey the young man had to sell his portion of the estate. When he sold the land he not only lost his identity but he jeopardized the only form of social security available in that culture. Without land he could not generate an income by farming, ranching, or leasing the land out to others. This reckless son depleted a significant portion of the family's social security fund. He lost everything. That is why he is called "prodigal."

The word "prodigal" does not mean wayward but "recklessly spendthrift." It means to spend until you have nothing left. The young son is called "the prodigal son" because of vv. 13-14, he gathered everything together...squandered everything and when he had spent everything, a

severe famine occurs. If that's not despicable enough the boy attached himself to a Gentile and was given the assignment of keeping pigs. To the Jews this boy was living in an environment that was ceremonially and spiritually unclean.

We know that the young man comes to his senses in v.17 but notice what he says in v.19. "Make me as one of your hired men." Hired men were the most independent of all the servants who worked on an estate. Bond slaves were the lowest ranking members of the household followed by household servants who were one step above bond slaves. But hired men were day laborers who came out from the city worked all day and then returned home at night. In other words the boy was thinking that maybe he could cut a deal with dad maintain some independence. He has come close to death but he is still a ways off from being able to give up his life (bios).

Repentance is not just acknowledging our flaws or admitting our guilt. It is not, "I made a mistake," but "I am ruined, I am a dead man." Repentance is a confession of our death...v. 21.

The dying calf...20b-24. This animal is sacrificed so the father could throw a party for his son. That's what Jesus is trying to tell us in this parable – God is a loving Father and He is throwing a party. He has killed the fatted calf (or more appropriately the sacrificial lamb) to pull it off. God paid a heavy price to bring us back from the dead but He was pleased to do it.

Isaiah 53:10 ¹⁰ But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting *Him* to grief; If He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering,

The father receives his wayward son with open arms. This young man did not deserve his father's favor. But that is what he gets. Pastor Tim Keller wrote an excellent little book on this subject called, *The Prodigal God*. Prodigal God? **"This term is therefore as appropriate for describing the father in the story as the younger son. The father's welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless, because he refused to "reckon" or count his sin against him or demand repayment...God's reckless grace is our greatest hope."** (Keller, p. xv)

The Father did not even put the boy on probation to see if he was truly sorry. He welcomed him with open arms and gives the order...vv. 22-24.

There is one final character - **the "living" elder brother...vv. 25-32.** He was frantically trying to hold on to what passed for his life. He is furious when he learns that the father is not only reconciling with the lost son but he is throwing a party for him. "It's not fair." The elder brother is practicing "salvation by bookkeeping." His insults his father, "Look!" (v. 29).

There are two ways of pursuing life in this world. There are two ways to be alienated from God and there are two ways to seek to be reconciled to God; through **moral conformity or self-discovery**. Both the religious and the irreligious are spiritually lost, both life paths are dead ends. Every thought of the human race about how to find life has been wrong. We were all born alive

to this fallen world but dead to God. There is only one solution – death. Only when we die to our worldly pseudo-life do we come alive to God. The only way we will ever experience the life God has for us is to surrender the one we have. Unless we give up our bios life we will never experience the zoe life God promises. That is what Jesus was trying to teach in this story.

Maybe you are a conformist. The conformist says, “I’m going to follow the rules and thereby deserve to be blessed.” Maybe you are a non-conformist who says, “I’m going to do my own thing and find myself and what makes me happy.” Both of these young men were rebellious sons. They had the same goal in mind, being independent from the father, one by being very bad and the other by being very good. The elder brother was more alienated from his father because he was blind to his true condition. It is an amazing thought that you can avoid being intimate with the Father by keeping all the rules. Only one of these two sons is reconciled to the father. Much to the shock of the Pharisees, it is the non-conformist, the wild child, the wayward son.

Grace works by raising the dead not rewarding the living. It seems no matter how many times we read the Bible we just can’t get our heads around it. The recurring theme in Jesus’ teaching was the last, the lost, the least and the little. We don’t want to be any of those things. But Jesus taught that grace is only available to the last, the lost, the least, and the little. This world is committed to salvation by winning. We will never understand the Gospel until we understand that Jesus was committed to salvation by losing. Somehow we think that putting ourselves at the head of the line marching in the wrong direction makes us less lost than those behind us. This story shows that our only hope at finding life is through death.

Luke 9:23-24 ²³ And He was saying to *them* all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴ "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.

That is why we are baptizing people this morning. Baptism is a symbolic act, commanded by Jesus, to show the world that I am dying to my old life to walk in newness of life.