

A Consuming Fire

11/10/24

Sermon #33 – Marshall Reeves

Luke 15:25

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

26 And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant.

27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.'

28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

32 It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

So, we're all very familiar with this parable of the prodigal. Malcolm has taught it to us enough we should be. It's about a son who leaves home, squanders all he has and in destitution, hunger, shame and guilt eventually finds his way home prepared to beg for both sustenance and forgiveness. Our focus is so occupied by the younger son and his behavior that the account of the older son is treated virtually as an afterthought. We can all imagine what living in filth, starvation and loneliness would do to create a desire for a change. The human body can only take so much of it until something would have to be done. The psyche heaped with guilt, remorse and shame would be just as destructive. In fact, that is the term Jesus uses for it, lost or 'apollumi', meaning to perish or be destroyed.

Luke 19:

10 "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is perishing or lost."

The dire nature of his circumstances provided the coercion needed to drive him back to his father, the source of all his needs. Once there he realized for the first time what being a son actually meant. There was far more than enough to meet his needs provided by the unconditional love that would never allow him to experience lack again. In addition, it resulted in the metanoia that revealed his true identity, yielding an understanding of who his father was and thus who he was. His hardened heart immersed in darkness and deception arose in the dawning light of pure love.

Romans 2:

4 “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?”

The young man’s story certainly bears this out.

But what of the older brother? According to the popular view of the modern church, he certainly seems to be the one who has his act together. He’s obviously a man who worked long hours for it was dusk when he returned home from the fields. Outside the porch, darkness had already enveloped the home. He was apparently in authority as he summoned a servant to explain what was taking place. Upon hearing it he became enraged. He immediately engages his father emphatically expressing his complete disapproval. Why wasn’t he consulted about this? After all he had worked and slaved his entire life in order to make something of this place! He felt dishonored and his pride wounded.

So, what can we gather about his mental emotional state based on his behavior. First of all, there is a sense of indignance upon his arrival as to what was going on and who authorized this? This literally exploded when he found out the reason for the celebration. We’re told he was angry; however, the word is actually to be enraged. His sense of right and wrong, good and evil were clearly challenged. There was no indication of love or compassion concerning the events, especially toward his brother’s condition. It was primarily about his role in the unfolding events. In his opinion his sibling was no more than a parasite who had extorted his inheritance from their father and through his wanton outrageous living had wasted every bit of it. He was useless and unworthy and made no contribution to the family. The judgement was final, he deserved to be punished for his behavior for a very long time. Eternally perhaps? It had little to do with his younger brother. He was incidental. It had everything to do with fulfilling his need for retributive justice.

The father knew his son’s rage was feigned. His older son’s opinion concerning his younger brother was obvious and most likely had been there for a long time. We’re given no indication that he tried to dissuade his sibling from leaving home much less to go after him in an effort to determine his whereabouts or well-being. After all, the prodigal had served him well by convincing the father to distribute their inheritance. By family custom the older brother always received two thirds and the younger the remainder. His brother had simply been a useful pawn to be played. As a result, the elder had made out quite well.

No, the father knew that his oldest son didn’t care what had happened to his brother’s estate as long as he still had his. His son wasn’t angry with his brother, he held no regard for him. The bitterness he harbored was toward his father! He could find no justification in his mind that would allow his younger

brother to be reinstated to a place of normalcy, much less honor in the family, especially in his father's eyes. As we peel back the layers, we begin to see clearly that it was never primarily a matter of money or prestige but of relationship. The daunting realization of the prodigal's reinstatement meant that all his effort and sacrifice had been for nothing. The years of telling himself that he was loved and accepted as long as he did everything he was supposed to do were in reality all for nothing. Such a colossal waste! He felt lied to and deceived. If his brother's life was acceptable then his was meaningless. As his mind spiraled, a powerful sense of estrangement from all he had known became clear. And who could blame him for feeling this way, he rationalized. A growing sense of having been violated was now palpable. Memories filled with resentment filled his mind. It wasn't just him he thought as he sought solace within relationship outside his family. Obviously even his friends weren't approved of in his father's eyes. Fear and anger were now joined by self-pity as he blurted out that he'd never asked for nor expected an all-out celebration with a fatted calf, but a young goat for he and his friends would have been more than satisfactory.

For these reasons and many others, he absolutely refused to come into the house. This was so incredibly unjust. At least there was fairness when the rules were involved. No, he would remain outside in the darkness. It was far preferable to associating with people who approved of lawless behavior and lived by their feelings! He would never confess the young son as his brother. There could be no family relationship here. And if I have no brother then I have no father. At least not one like this. I'll go my own way and the father I imagine will be the one I look to. He will have much more in common with me and my standards. I will project my sense of right and wrong, of good and evil upon him and create my own God. At least we'll understand each other.

And there we have it. By eliminating unconditional love, compassion and forgiveness from the character of God, we settle for a religious idol. For an idol is something dead that we try with all our might to project life into. From the fall forward man has sought to create his own God.

Romans 1:

25 "because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator..."

The word for lie here is 'pseudomai' meaning something false. We get our word pseudonym from it, meaning a fictitious name or identity. To live with a God of our own making is very comfortable to the flesh of man because he can control it. By ascribing rules, mostly of our own making, this god and those who choose to follow him, are easily manipulated. In this environment manipulation and relationship are one and the same.

To remove the mask and better understand this darkness let's examine the word most often translated in the New Testament as evil and wicked. In the Greek it is 'poneros' and is defined as that which is full of labor, hardship and annoyance. The Mirror Bible defines the word to mean religion or that which is religious.

Thus, we see a powerful example of it in

John 3:

19 "And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

It appears at first glance that God is judging man's works as evil due to the fact that they are originated in darkness rather than light. Furthermore, men who do evil hate the light because their deeds are exposed for what they are. This makes perfect sense to most of the church because after all man is nothing but a depraved sinner. So, what else should we expect, right? Wrong!

When we define the words correctly, we have a completely different picture. Substitute evil with religious.

"...and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were religious"

"For every one who practices religion hates the light and doesn't come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed."

The word exposed means to be convicted or convinced and whose job is that?

John 16:

8 "And when He comes, he will convince (convict) the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."

In other words, the Holy Spirit. Religion, as a crutch and a means of controlling others, isn't God's intention. The Spirit has come to illuminate Christ who is our life. To attempt to keep the law is religion. It's an effort to prove oneself acceptable in God's eyes. The church today is built around a combination of grace and law. It's impossible to grasp the true gospel with this mindset because it's a contractual arrangement not a covenant relationship born in intimate love and absolute union. Our Bible translators still hold to this view as evidenced in verses like

Revelation 22:

12 "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to his work."

His work? Man's work? If true, shouldn't we resign ourselves to being justified by the works of the law? Absolutely not! That is the very bondage we've been liberated from. Once more according to the Mirror, "His" should be capitalized because in proper syntax the object of this sentence is also the subject, i.e. "I AM". It is the finished work of Christ, the Lamb of God, whose work all men are judged by. For we have all been born again in Him at His resurrection (1 Pet 1:3) and presented as holy, blameless and irreproachable in His sight.

So how do we sum up the attitudes of the two sons? The younger was ungrateful, somewhat spoiled and bore a sense of entitlement. His sense of self-worth was defined by physical possessions and felt they should be given to him.

The elder was driven by insecurity and also had no awareness of innate worth. He felt he must earn everything he would possess. The younger, by virtue of birth, would be given everything but without wisdom and gratitude was unable to manage it. The elder was also given everything by virtue of birth, but without wisdom and gratitude he too was unable to manage it. They were two sides of the same coin. With both men their downfalls appeared to be the earthly possessions they received and their ideas concerning their meaning. To have or not have defined them. They followed the concept of blessing and curses. If I am affluent then obviously God has blessed me with value and worth. I have been ordained as acceptable. But what about when we're broke and hungry and living in a pigsty? What does that say about our worth then?

Deut 30:

19 "...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live,

20 loving the LORD your God, obeying His voice, and cleaving to Him; for that means life to you and length of days..."

These verses are better understood when we know the meaning of curse. It is that which is declared loathsome, hateful and abhorrent and therefore execrated or cast out. In scripture it describes the aberrant fallen mindset of Adam. To live from it is to live from the flesh, a false identity. It is not who we are. His command through the ages has consistently been to remember who we are by remembering Him for we are made in His image. It is the meaning of our Eucharist celebration.

The older brother obviously had a strong work ethic and had been given the talent and ability to manage a successful ranching operation. We in America admire this sort of thing because it points to a successful self-made character. It's the American way. But what good does strong character do when you're being eaten alive on the inside by anxiety and doubt concerning your standing with God; only being as acceptable as your ability to produce. Of relying on your own capabilities as the mainstay of your relationship.

Gen 3 describes this condition.

17 "...Cursed is the ground because of you;

In sorrow you will eat of it

All the days of your life.

18 Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;

And you will eat the plants of the field;

19 By the sweat of your face you will eat bread,

Till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken;

For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The ground in Hebrew describes the return to mortality of Adam as the dust from which he had been taken. The verses speak of the return to that state and the struggle it caused the man in his efforts to produce. The definition of the word for sorrow, as "in sorrow you will eat of it" is worrisomeness or anxiety in your toil. Sweat means perspiration but it also means to shake, agitate or tremble as with fear. It is to be vexed, which is to cause distress or affliction. It describes a life of futility in separation from God.

Understand that God never abandoned man but in man's separation from God life became a struggle. It describes a religious perception and certainly portrays the attitude of the older brother. For all his

seeming bravado and authority, we have an idea of what is going on inside. The emperor has no clothes. The conversion of the younger brother came at the end of great trial. When there was no one or nothing left to turn to, God drew him home in order to reveal the depths of His love.

But what of the state of the older brother? Did he continue in his destructive condition for the rest of his natural life? We're not told with certainty but we are left with the assurance of hope. We can all agree that religion is a hard habit to break. That's often why it is easier to reach the unchurched with the gospel than the church. But it is breakable or most of us wouldn't be here this morning.

Religion instills a powerful sense of division within humanity. It is a dualistic construct that produces an "us vs. them" belief system. There's the good guys and the bad guys. I remember vividly being taught growing up that the poor people in Africa or remote south sea islands who had never heard the name of Jesus as their savior would die in their sin and spend their eternal existence in the conscious torment of Hell. Why? Because they were born in the wrong time and place. We on the other hand were quite fortunate to be born in America where we could learn about the love and mercy of God. I was told not to question this because it fell under the divine providence of God as to who went to heaven and who went to hell.

That's pure dualistic teaching. It's actually more than that. What it describes is eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Let's look at this tree vs. the Tree of Life. We're told that God planted many trees in the Garden, all pleasant to the sight and good to eat. But the two mentioned by name are fundamental to man's chosen destiny. The early church believed without question that The Tree of Life was symbolic of Jesus Christ, The Way. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil exemplifies man's path, the "Not The Way". Ancient Hebrew was a purely pictorial language. It used many things found in nature to illustrate its meaning. Trees are a good example as they were often used as representative of men. The fruit of the trees spoke to identity.

Gen 2:

9 "And out of the ground Yahweh God caused to grow every tree that is desirable in appearance and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The ground of course is where God planted the incredible variety of men, all expressions of Christ and all good. The garden is representative of the mind of man. God gave one warning to man, that being the tree or identity he would choose. One of obedience and oneness of life with God or one of disobedience and separation.

Isa 61:

3 "So, they will be called the trees of righteousness [strong and magnificent, distinguished for integrity, justice, and right standing with God], The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."

Luke writes based on Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount

3:9 "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Notice that He addresses the root of the tree and the refining fire that destroys it of which we'll talk more about momentarily.

Francois du Toit, among others, says that is exactly what the two trees are, metaphors for identity. The Tree of Life of course exemplifies the man of whom we read about in

John 1: (Mirror)

12 "As many as identified with Him He gave the assurance of being sons of God, those having been convinced of their true design and origin."

But those who choose the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil seek after a life convinced as to separation from God with a need to re-establish through their own efforts. Their good works are a delusion and can only achieve self-righteousness, a righteousness apart from God. The goal of the fallen mindset of Adam being as follows:

Isa 14:

14 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'

Understand that I'm not condemning everything termed religion. We observe liturgy and sacrament not as a means to an end but as a celebration that all has been finished. What I'm speaking to is the legalistic bondage ignited by the flesh of man that continuously desires to prove itself. The flesh loves a set of rules to pursue in order to judge and compare. It is not sourced in love and compassion and denies the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world today but relies solely on the written word as a rule book for life. Religious endeavor is inextricably linked to the flesh for that is its source. This is the ancient and primal mindset of the fall and was certainly nothing new at the time of Christ and this parable. The flesh is not part of our being but a condition of the mind of man found in darkness and separation.

As recorded by Matthew, Jesus elaborates further:

Matt 12:

35 “The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil (religious) man out of his evil (religion) treasure brings forth evil (more religious bondage).”

To bring forth the evil treasure of religion from one’s heart is to walk in the blindness and death of legalism. It is deception. The older brother cared little for anyone other than himself. The remarkable truths in this parable are that God ran to the younger brother upon his return but also what He did for his other son as we read in

Vs 28 “But the elder brother became angry and deeply resentful and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him.”

His Father appeared to him in the outer darkness, identifying and calling him by his true name.

In other words, He joins us where we are in order to reveal our identity to us. And how will He accomplish this? It is easier with some than others. The younger brother reacted to it in his darkness and separation when his father ran to him and embraced him in unconditional love. The older brother was too blinded by rage to acknowledge it. But there’s no escaping the reality that “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). He isn’t a vindictive God seeking punishment and retribution but a God of fire who is love.

Mark 9:49 tells us “For everyone will be salted with fire.”

We are all exposed to this consuming fire of love by the presence of Christ within. Salt is the ancient preservative while fire is the agent of refinement. We are all being salted and refined in this life as we walk in the Spirit. As Malcolm says those of us who have come to know God is Love dance in it. We have chosen to eat from the Tree of Life and are thus dancing in the perichoresis where this refining is taking place naturally. But those who refuse will experience something different.

Matt 13:

41 The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,

42 and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

But then comes the beautiful promise!

43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

When men step through the veil that separates this life from the next, we will encounter the beautiful and loving presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who makes whole. Not angels on clouds playing harps nor demons torturing the undead in some apocalyptic horror scene, but the loving face of Jesus. This is the transformation of death to life that He has wrought. The very light of His glorious presence is the furnace who is the consuming fire of love. He is the smelting pot that ultimately removes all dross in spite of the vehemence and anger of those who insist that they've done everything right. They doggedly hold to their religious lives as having been the proper path to righteousness. The rage for having all their good deeds destroyed is exhibited by angry tears and gnashing of teeth. But this is the merciful womb love of God on display for all creation in verse 43.

For it is these self-same individuals that afterward will shine forth in resplendent fashion in the kingdom of their Father. Paul adds to the words of Jesus in

1 Cor 3:

15 "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

I believe these are the very truths that have been twisted and distorted to portray the hell that many in the Church have used to instill fear for the purpose of control and manipulation. Fear is the basis for this relationship, which is no relationship at all. That's what religion does. Just as the brothers in the parable, we create our own hell within ourselves by believing the deception and denying our true identity. By His very essence of love, God's only intention and dream is to undo the lie and all the damage it has caused and make us right and whole again. It is His Word that assures us that He causes all things to work together for good. This not only includes you but all your loved ones of whom you have been so worried about over the years concerning their eternal destinies. No need to worry for they are in the best of hands, the nail scarred ones.

Amen!