

Faithful on the Outside but Decayed on the Inside

by Sandeep Poonen

The sermon warns about the danger of a decaying heart, where a person appears faithful on the outside but is corrupted on the inside, and emphasizes the importance of prioritizing love and relationships over wealth and material possessions.

Duration: 36:12

Scripture: Genesis 13:8-11, Ruth 1:11-17, Luke 15:11-32, John 21:15-17, Romans 4:17

Topics: "Heart Decay", "Mercy And Grace"

Description

This sermon delves into the parable of the lost son from Luke 15, focusing on the often overlooked character of the older brother. It highlights the dangers of a decaying heart, where external faithfulness masks internal decay, and emphasizes the importance of having the right priorities and showing mercy to others. The sermon draws parallels between the older brother's measuring scale of life equating to wealth and the contrasting spirit of Abraham and Ruth, urging listeners to choose to feed God's sheep and prevent their hearts from decaying.

Transcript

So I want to talk today about someone who I think we're all familiar with. This is a brother who has been coming for years to the church. He's been around for many years.

He knows the Bible well. He can tell you many stories about God working in his life. He's not somebody who just comes and sits and goes home.

He's somebody who's active in the church. And I know he's faithful to read his Bible every day and to pray every day. And he has a good life.

I mean, things are going well for him. His work is doing well. His family is doing well.

He's prospering in every way. And I think we all know who I'm talking about. It's from the story in Luke 15.

It's the story of the lost son. Luke chapter 15, where we know the story. Don't want to go through all of it, but there was a father who had two sons.

Younger son rebelled against the father, walked away. And he came back after he's wasted all the money. And he came back in repentance, not even being fit, wanting to be fit to be called a son.

And the father welcomed him with open arms. And we know the story that the elder brother was not too happy about that because the elder brother had stayed with the family the whole time. And so the older brother stayed outside the house.

And the father came out to meet him. And so the person I want to talk about is about the older brother in the story. Because this story is so fascinating to me.

It's my favorite story, I think, of all the parables. Because I think part of the beauty of this story is you don't know who the main character is. You think it's the younger son because the story talks mostly about him.

But there's so much about that I have learned about God as a father from the father in the prodigal story. And there's so much to learn from the older son as yet. I feel like the younger son is somebody who teaches us about how we were in the world, and how we were in sin, and how we walked away from God, and how God brought us near.

But after we become, we come into the church, after we become Christians, after we accept God, then we have a lot to learn about God and what happens to us while we're in the church. And we learn about God from the father in the story. And you see his love and his unashamed love, his unfathomable love.

If it wasn't written in the story it would be unbelievable. The forgiveness and the mercy that he extends. But also there's a warning.

Jesus ends the story with a warning when he talks about the elder brother. Because the elder brother is a picture of a person who, what could happen to a person after he's come to the church. After he stayed with the father for many years.

And you know for many years, if you look at the picture stories, that's what I grew up with when I was a child. You see these pictures and the younger brother is always shown as being somebody who's not that bad looking. But the elder brother almost has a frown and a scowl the whole time.

And you almost feel like he's got two horns in the back the whole time you hear about him. Because he almost comes across as being a devil. But I think where we have to read the story is, suppose this older brother was one of us.

Suppose this older brother was you or me. You know we know how, you know, is it possible that we could still be in the house having dinner with the father every day. And still have a sin creeping up on us so badly that we don't want to have anything more to do with the father or the family.

We could go years and years thinking everything is fine. And suddenly one thing happens. One incident happens.

And it surprises us, takes us all by shock. We find ourselves outside the house, the very thing we'd never thought we'd do. We find ourselves not really interested in the things of God.

We're not really interested. It's so possible for it to be you or me. You know, we know how we all began.

We know how this boy began. We probably saw him in the father's house day after day, week after week working, sitting at the father, hearing stories from him. And he worked his heart out.

He worked his fingers to the bone. And he fed that fatted calf after the younger brother went. He never wanted to eat that calf.

He fed it every day because that's what the father wanted. And he didn't go out every night. He had dinner with the father every night because he didn't want to waste the inheritance of the father's money.

That's what it kind of says. He implies in that verse. In verse 29 of Luke 15, he says, I've been serving you.

I've never neglected a command, and you've never given me a kid. I'm sure he didn't ask for it. I'm sure if he had asked for it, he would have gotten it.

But he never asked for it. He chose not to be married with his friends. And he played by the rules, but he's saving all his money.

And surely nobody can say that he left in rebellion. He's still with the father, isn't he? And so he's definitely safe, right? And I think that that's what the danger of this problem is. I think it's possible that we can have dinner every night, thinking every week we can come, thinking that everything is okay, but there's a horrible, horrible decaying going on inside of our heart.

You know, if we went to have dinner with this family in this story, we probably would have said this older brother is what we need to be like. He's a perfect, he's a model citizen. Everything's going well with him.

He's so respectful to his father. He's staying by his father's side. But something inside had gone so horribly wrong that underneath all the goodness that he had done, something had gone wrong.

Is it possible, dear brothers and sisters, that behind all the goodness and the kind acts that we do, something goes wrong? That I could, that you could stand up here, I could stand up here and preach, I could talk about all the wonderful things about God, but a sickness and evilness has come into my heart. Nobody can tell it, except God. And that I could go years and years following God, thinking I'm following God, and reveal a corrupted heart underneath.

Because I have no more, and the proof of it is I have no more desire to hang out with God, to hang out with the family of God. Absolutely, it's possible. That's why Paul says we have to be watchful.

We have to be sober-minded. We have to be careful. He's not writing to people who are not yet Christians.

And we have to be careful and sober against the things of the world. We also have to be careful of that heart that can decay. So I titled my talk, Faithful on the Outside, but Decayed on the Inside.

Looks all faithful on the outside, but it's decaying on the inside. I want to talk about, there's so much to talk about the older brother. I want to talk about two symptoms in the older brother.

That's symptoms of a decayed heart. I want to talk about a different measuring scale that the older brother used to measure life. And I want to talk about the unresolved controversy, the unresolved issue that the older brother had in his heart and never dealt with.

So I want to talk first about the scale that the older brother used to measure life. And it's in verse 31 of Luke chapter 15. And you know the father says, the son says, I'm sorry in verse 30, but when this son of yours came, he's talking about the younger brother, the older brother's talking to the father and he says, when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed a fattened calf for him.

And the margin of my Bible, it says literally the word for wealth is living. He felt that the younger brother had destroyed his father's life, his father's living. And so he put the scales, the way the older brother lived life is he had the scales on one hand and he had all the wealth of his father on one hand and his good deeds on the other hand.

But the big thing was you couldn't touch the wealth. That's why he never asked for the fattened calf. That's why he never accepted the goodness of the father.

He always worked. And so when he saw the younger brother coming and taking his part of the inheritance, he said, you've robbed my father's life. And as a result, because he was going to get the inheritance of the father, he felt he had lost his own life.

And as far as he was concerned, when the son came home, yes, it must have been nice for him to be back, but the money was wasted and had to be accounted for. There had to be a judgment about that. And for the older brother, life equated wealth.

And as a consequence, even his own life was destroyed when the younger brother went home, went away from home. And it was not repaid when the son comes back. The wealth is still gone.

And so he had more of life when he had more wealth, and he had less of life when he had less wealth. And I want to talk about this for our own lives because, you know, we even use the expression, I do this to make a living. And I understand the expression, but it can slowly become where everything I do, everything I do for work, everything I do to succeed, can be about all of what I'm living for.

And all my life can slowly become wrapped up in the things that I do. And I live in a different country, and I live in a different situation with different problems, so this is not targeted at somebody. This is something God spoke to me a few weeks ago before I left to come here.

I was offered an interesting offer to work with a couple of partners to do some business. Nothing bad. Great opportunity, I think.

Very creative work. And as I thought about it, it sounds very exciting. But this is what the Lord was teaching me through all of this.

He asked me this, if you take this job, will you lose your opportunity to use the gifts that I've given you for the kingdom? And I'm not saying you have to not take one job, you have to take another job. It does not mean you have to do this lifestyle or that lifestyle. But God was targeting something in me, a mindset that he says, watch out because that will decay your heart.

And my living can become so wrapped up with the things of this world and getting more of the things of this world that I always take the better offer. I always look at the better offer because I want to take care of my family. I want to have a better life.

Nothing wrong with that, is there? Absolutely not. There's nothing wrong with having a more comfortable life. But at some point, I slowly find myself that the gifts are no longer being used.

The gifts that could have blessed the brothers in the church have no longer been used. If we truly mean what we say when we read, we sang in that song, we're pilgrims here. We're just passing through.

It would seem to make sense to me that I should do something to invest in the people who are going to be with me, with my real home, if this is not my home. Do we remember when heaven came down and glory filled my soul? I remember that. I remember when I was 17, I was so excited about the gospel.

I was so excited about what Jesus did for me. And I truly believe heaven came down and filled my soul. What a wonderful day.

A day I will never forget. But it's been a few years since then. I've lived a lot, experienced a lot.

And slowly, I spent most of my 20s thinking that I could outsmart the devil. I thought I could balance it all out. I could have a nice little thali, thali of food.

I had a little bit of rice and a little bit of sambar and a little bit of, not too much of anything. I had a little bit of Jesus, a little bit of work. They all fit together in my plate and I had a nice balanced meal.

I never understood what I had when I was 17, that Jesus was meant to be the center. He was supposed to be the main dish, not this distribution and equality of all my different interests. And I see something that has really blessed me about the churches in India.

Whenever I come back, it is that people generally here value one another in the church. They generally value time spent with one another. And I'll tell you, I can speak for my brothers, I'm sure we crave that.

And Western Christianity, I know for myself from what I've experienced, it's going to where we live very comfortable lives. So we build bigger houses, we build our walls a little higher. And we don't need to go out because everything comes into our house through the TV or through whatever thing happens.

We can order food, it can come in. So we have less and less need to go out and go be among the people. And we become independent Christians.

And we listen to sermons on the internet and I feel like I don't need to be a part of a family. And I feel like most Christians are growing up today without the sense of God wanted us to become a part of a family. If he's a father, then surely there is a family.

If there's a father which is God and if there's a brother who's Jesus Christ, there is a family. But we're missing it because we become so independent. We're not doing anything wrong.

I'm not doing some crazy sins, but I don't love like I used to love. And it doesn't matter if I, what I think is, it's creeping in across the world. And I feel like we in India really need to watch out for what has already been attacking the church and other parts of the world.

Where God can separate our Christianity from being a family to being a club. From being an organism to being an organization as I heard somebody say. And they're all not tied together anymore.

And it's not a group thing. For me it's a personal thing. Am I doing my part to spend my gifts, to give my gifts to the people who are going to make it.

For the people who think that this is not their home. That heaven is their home. Am I investing something with them? Or was it so much before and now it's come down to a trickle.

And then it doesn't matter what I do when I get up, when I speak. It doesn't matter how much I speak. It doesn't matter how much I sing.

I could even have a very prosperous life. That is absolutely no bearing. I can testify from my own life.

It is no bearing on whether God is well pleased with me. None of those things. And we see the father as having a different measuring scale.

The older brother's problem started because he had a different measuring scale. He measured things by wealth. By the things of this world.

And you look at the father. He measured things by relationship. He says in verse 32.

You know so when the younger brother had gone away, he lost something. But the money was not what he lost. He lost a person.

And when the younger son came home, he gained what he had lost. What had been lost had been found. The money had not been found.

The person had been found. So as far as he was concerned, all that was lost had been found again. And verse 32 it says, but we had to celebrate and rejoice for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found.

You know I don't know if the older brother knew what the father, the high hopes the father had for the older brother. He had sat with the father every day at dinner, but he never picked up on the father's spirit. You see in that verse 32 it says, the younger brother had just begun to live.

He had just been born almost. It's almost, it's not like he was fully living again. He was a happy Christian.

He was all back to normal. No, the father knew better. He's just begun to live.

He's grown up physically, but emotionally and spiritually, he's a newborn babe. The older brother who'd been in the house for so long, there was a role for him. There was a role the father had for him all those years.

He, the youngest son needed to learn what it meant to live again, like you take care of a newborn baby. The youngest son needed to be free of his insecurities and the bad habits he picked up in the world. The youngest son needed to learn how to live like a son, not like a hireling he had learned to live for so many years.

And all the years the youngest son had gone, the father had at least thought, I have one son with me that I can train him that when the youngest son comes back, he will be a brother to walk with him, to walk with him alongside. That was the purpose of the older brothers. And the father probably saw the hypocrisy of the older brother, but he kept hoping, I hope my spirit rubs off on him, that he may understand that I have

a much bigger calling for those who have been faithful.

But he never got to see it, because his heart had been decayed. And we don't know what the older brother responded, we don't know what he said at the end of the chapter. He could have responded in contrition, just like the younger brother, he could have said, you're right.

I am not worthy to call him my brother based on my heart. But I've come back in forgiveness. And the father would have said, let's get a second calf, let's have two feasts, both sons are back.

The heart, what has been lost in that heart, is found again. Or he could have rejected his father's peace and just went out right. But I fear, and what I want to talk about, and what God convicted me about, is a third response.

I hope he picked the first one, but the third response is what I believe is the most dangerous. He could have conceded to his father's response, and gone back in the house. But he never took care of the issue, the controversy he held in his heart against his older brother.

He sat in the house, and he sat with dad and brother, but he looked at brother differently. And he was all civil, and friendly, and nice when dad was around. But if dad ever left the room, younger brother would get a little hit.

May have been a verbal hit. The younger, older brother would remind him how much money had been lost. The older brother would remind him of all the sins he heard he had committed, and saying is it true? Is this true? I'm not trying to embarrass you, I'm just trying to find out, did it really happen like this? And all these different questions he kept badgering him with.

And the father, he couldn't do it when the father was around, because the father would have nothing to do with it. But when they left to themselves, he'd go attack him again. So much so that if the father were to die, I can see that the younger brother would say, I'm going to leave again.

But he wouldn't leave in rebellion this time. He would leave because he would rather eat with the pigs, than eat with somebody with such a negative attitude. He couldn't take a person who called himself a brother, who acted like a swine.

He'd rather hang out with the real swine. And that's what is so dangerous that can happen in the church. That is something that we as Christians need to guard against.

A decaying heart begins with a lack of the right priorities, where wealth and the things of this world become important. And it results in my terrible response to the sin in others. And we talked about mercy the last time we were here.

And that's something that is so integral to what this older brother never failed to realize. What the older brother failed to realize. Because it seems, if you look at it from a certain standpoint, it seems boring.

It seems boring to be the older brother. It seems quite convenient for the younger brother to do all he wanted to have, all his fun, and come back and say, I got the ring again. I got the Fatikaf.

That seems like I didn't miss anything. And I never understood until I understood what was the father's intention for the older brother. The reason we stay in the church is because, yes, we have a loving relationship with the father and it's much better than the things of the world.

But as important as it's for the newborn babies, the new people who come in who are just beginning to live. And we lose not only the ability to reach out to them, but we also end up losing our relationship with our father when we start to have that unmerciful spirit, unmerciful look, that unmerciful thought that is allowed to sit and fester. That's the beginning of a decaying heart.

And it's a tragedy, family, it's a tragedy if we sit for years in the church and we want the things of this world as our living. It is so deep inside of me. It is such a complicated thought process that I have had to spend a lot of time, and we ought to spend a lot of time, is my living the things of this world.

How much of my living, Jesus said, store up treasures in heaven. How much of my living is storing up treasures in heaven? And it's a tragedy, family, as well, if we sit in the father's house and we speak death into people's lives. He didn't want to agree with his father that his son was alive.

He didn't see the difference between the younger son, younger brother, as being dead to alive. And he continued to say he's dead because he wasted my living, which was his wealth. I want to show you a contrast of a different person, the person who's supposed to be the father of our faith.

In Romans chapter 4, verse 17, he talks about Abraham. And Paul says that he is the father for us, for those who are, who also claim to believe and have faith. And verse 17, it says, as it is written, a father of many nations have I made you.

He's talking about Abraham in the sight of him, which is in the sight of God, whom Abraham believed, even God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence and calls into being that which does not exist. This is a different kind of God than the younger, older brother believed in. It's a sharp contrast.

One wanted death when there was life. And another one said, I still see a lot of death. But I see, there's a lot of death one can concentrate on, but I see the life.

That's why the father in the story was sitting, waiting and could see the son coming home because he saw into existence things that never existed as yet. He saw the youngest son coming home before the youngest son came home because he had a heart that said, I want things to exist, the things of God to exist in other people which not yet don't exist. The older brother would prefer if the younger brother didn't exist anymore.

But Abraham called it into life and said, I want this person to exist. The spirit of the older brother is the one that stifles any life that's springing up. And the spirit of Abraham is to lift up and encourage.

And we see that in Genesis chapter 13. Genesis chapter 13, we see about Abraham and his spirit to encourage. This is an incredible story of what we are inspired to do by somebody in the Old Testament.

Abraham is left because of the call of God and with him comes his family and including in there is Lot. But there's strife in verse 7 of chapter 13 in Genesis. It says there's strife between Abraham's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen.

Then in verse 8 it says, please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? You please separate from me. If to the left, then I will go to the right, or if to the right, then I will go to the left.

In verse 7, you see he calls them brothers. Abraham lifted Lot up and made him a brother and treated him like one. Lot was not his brother.

Lot was his nephew. Older man, much older man, but he said, you're my brother. I'm going to treat you like my brother because you left your family and the Kura of the Chaldees and came with me.

He chose to believe that I'll treat you like a brother. The conflict, you should concede to me because you came with me, but I'll treat you like a brother. And he said, you know what, you choose.

I'm not going to choose. You choose first. What an honor for a younger brother to get from an older brother.

The spirit of Abraham. How much we can learn from this Abraham's spirit. How gracious he was to somebody when he wasn't at fault.

Abraham was not at fault, but the graciousness of Abraham is what the spirit of Christ is also all about. Here we see the older brother in this chapter leading the way and supporting the younger brother, Lot. And you see what happens in verse 10.

You see what Lot responded. It's almost a reversal. Here the younger brother lifts up his eyes in verse 10 and 11 and saw all the valley of the Jordan that it was well watered everywhere.

This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zohar, this was like the garden of Eden. Lot says, how can I not choose this? This is too good an offer.

So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. And you know, we see here that the choice that Lot has to make.

You can take whatever you like. You can take the land flowing with milk and honey. You can take the promised land.

You can take the garden of Eden. Or the option that was not really proposed to him but was on the table was, you can stay with me and you can concede to me. You'll just get a fraction of whatever you get when I die.

And again we see the measuring scales of Abraham and the measuring scales of Lot. Abraham says, my living is not my wealth. But Lot indicated here what his measuring scale was.

The garden of Eden, that beautiful thing, how can I not reject it? Life equals wealth. And so he took it and it's the saddest verse. The worst part of that interaction is right there in the end of verse 11.

And they separated from each other. And we know the rest of the story. We know what happened to Lot.

Lot went and lived in Sodom and Gomorrah, one of the most evil places ever. And Lot had to be taken out, finally saved because Abraham interceded for him. Again the graciousness of Abraham, never holding it, saying he took the fun place.

Now let him take care, get out of it too. He interceded to God on Lot's behalf. And Lot got pulled out.

Then in Genesis chapter 19, verse 36 and 37, it says, and this is how bad it gets. The daughters of Lot were with child by their father. Lot bore children with his own daughters.

And the firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. And he's the father of the Moabites to this day. This is how bad, this is how tragically decayed one can get.

All starts when life equals wealth. And I bring up that passage with Lot just to say, there was a person, there was another person who was given the same offer, a similar offer to what Abraham and Lot got, that Abraham gave Lot. Somebody else was given the same offer and chose a completely different response.

As one of Lot's descendants. In Ruth chapter 1, Ruth was a Moabite. Ruth was a descendant of this sinful interaction between Lot and his daughter.

And here's Ruth who has a history of tragedy, a history of deep sin. And in verse 1, I'll read a few verses. In verses 11 through 17, Naomi said, return my daughters, similar to what Abraham told Lot, you go there, let me go home by myself.

Return my daughters, why should you go with me? Have I yet set sons in my womb that they may be your husbands? Return my daughters, go for I'm too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No my daughters, for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me. Great argument.

Just go your separate way, you've got your whole life ahead of me. Go back to the Moabites, hang out there, spend time with them, then have a new life, build a new life. And they lifted up their voices and one of them, Orpah, kissed her mother-in-law and left.

But Ruth clung to her and said, and Naomi said to Ruth, behold your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods, go after your sister-in-law. Do it, do the logical thing, do the smart move, make the right choice, make the smart choice. But Ruth said, don't urge me to leave you or turn back from following you, for where you go, I will go.

For where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people. Your God will be my God, your people will be my people. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.

That's the spirit of Abraham, that's the spirit of Ruth, and that's the same offer that is offered again and again and again by the enticements of the world, by the things of this world, to say, separate from me. It's the logical choice. There's just way too much to lose if you don't do it.

And these are all smart choices that we make. We have measuring scales that says it points clearly to saying that I should go this way. But if I have no value for His God, for Abraham's God becoming my God, if I have no value for the God of our church becoming my God, my heart will become to decay.

And then I can't say like Ruth, your God will be my God, your people will be my people. And that's the challenge, family of God, brothers and sisters, to protect us and to prevent us from letting our hearts decay. We need to be so careful, we have to build walls around our hearts to protect the spirit and the logical attitude of the world that says, go in this way, do this way.

And I preach as one who is still working so much on this. I don't know what I'm going to choose in my own job. But I feel this is a warning from God to my own life, saying you have a choice in the world.

There's a fork in the road and you can pick. And I've definitely gone down a lot of wrong paths, but God's giving me another fork in the road. And God gives us folks in the roads at the end of the year, as we said, to re-evaluate our lives and we see we've gone down a wrong path.

And God says, you choose again today who you're going to serve. Is it going to be my people or is it going to be yourself? Jesus says, do you love me more than these? I say, yes, I do, Lord. That's what Peter said.

You know I do. He says, here's the proof of it. Here's the proof of it, family.

You feed my sheep. You feed my lambs. They're just born.

You've shepherded my sheep. That is the call of God for us who remain in the church. That is the call of God for us to prevent our hearts from being decayed and one day finding ourselves rejecting God outright.

I pray that all of us will start getting into the business of feeding God's sheep. It's not a corporate business, but it becomes our living. Feeding his sheep, feeding his lambs, shepherding his sheep.

More and more as I live life and I hang out and listen to the things of God, there's nothing that could be more beautiful to do that. They're not big sermons. They're little acts of kindness.

They're little thoughts and it's an attitude that, God, you're my God and your people are my people.

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