

Give Me Mine

by Tim Keller

Tim Keller's sermon examines the parable of the prodigal son to reveal how idolatry disrupts community and family cohesion.

Duration: 35:41

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 15, Romans 8:17

Topics: "Prodigal Son"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker introduces the last of the three parables in Luke 15, which is the longest and most famous. The speaker suggests that the story is about an assault on community caused by idolatry, which can only be overcome through agony. The parable depicts the dissolution of a family and two major assaults on its integrity. The first assault comes from the younger brother who asks for his share of the estate before his father's death, leading to the unraveling of the family. The speaker emphasizes that the gospel creates a new kind of community by recognizing the beauty of God and His sacrificial love.

Transcript

The scripture this morning is taken from the book of Luke, chapter 15, verses 11 through 32. Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons.

The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth and wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went out and hired himself to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hired men. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son through his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to the father, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

But the father said to his servants, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Let's have a feast and celebrate. For the son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the oldest son was in a field and when he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never obeyed your orders, yet you never even gave me a young goat so I can celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes come home, you kill the fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. This is the word of the Lord.

We're looking for seven weeks at Luke 15. And in Luke 15, we're learning how the gospel creates a special kind of community, how the gospel creates a new kind of community. And today we start looking at the last of the three parables.

It's the most famous, it's the longest, and we're going to look at it for six weeks. And so this is just an overview really and an intro, though I hope it'll be a convicting one. We don't have to say everything about it here.

But I'd like you to think about this story, and it is a familiar story, is it not, in a slightly different way than you probably want to do. I'd like you to consider that the story is giving us a picture of an assault on community because of idolatry, which is only overcome by agony. It's an assault on community through idolatry.

It's only overcome by agony. And this is our first avenue into understanding this very rich and important text. First of all, this is an assault on community.

Maybe you don't see it that way. That's probably because we're modern Western people. But if you look at it, and certainly most people most times in places and cultures in the world would realize that what this story is about is about the dissolution of a family.

This is about a family that's unraveling and coming apart. And there are two great assaults on the integrity and the cohesion of this family. The first great assault comes from the younger brother, of course.

Because the younger brother comes to the father and says, in verse 12, Father, give me my share of the estate. Now, the older son in those days, in those places, always got a double portion of what every other sibling got. And since there were two children, two sons, the younger brother would have had coming to him when the father died, a third of the estate.

So he was coming and asking for a third of the estate. But the operative word here is when the father dies. And one commentator put it like this.

In Middle Eastern culture, to ask for the inheritance while the father is alive, still alive, is to wish him dead. A traditional Middle Eastern father can only respond in one way. He would be expected to strike the boy across the face for his insolence and drive him out of the with verbal and physical blows.

Why is this an assault on the family? Well, first of all, it's a huge assault, we'll get back to this in a second, on the economic status of the family, because the father is going to have to liquidate a third of the estate. Even more than that, this would have been an absolute humiliation. Everyone in the town, everyone around would know what the son had done.

And in a Middle Eastern patriarchal society, that was absolutely unheard of. It was over the top. And the name of the family had now been assaulted.

But most of all, of course, the son was saying, I want out of here. I don't want you to be my father anymore. I want to live without a family.

And I'm gone. And so this is an enormous assault on the cohesion and the family. But that's not all.

As you know, and we will again get to this in some detail later on, as a hope beyond hope, it's a miracle. In the middle of the story, we see a younger brother brought back in the father embracing the younger brother. And it looks like there's a reclamation project that's about to restore the family.

And at the moment of the greatest triumph, it's the elder brother now who assaults the integrity of the family. When the elder brother refuses to go in, what he's saying is, I don't want to be part of the family like this. And I'm the heir now.

All this inheritance is mine. And I refuse to let you do what you're doing. I will not be part of a family with him in it.

That's why there's a crisis now. And the story at the end is just as much at a crisis point as it was in the beginning. You know that.

Because anyone who understands that the family is the basic human community, and especially in those days, the listeners would have been, what is the matter with these kids? Of course, they're both assaulting the family and they are. So there's been an assault on community. But what is causing the assault? What is the underlying cause for the disruption? What is it that is tearing this family apart? And the answer here, if we read the text carefully is idolatry.

Now, you say, where's the word? Well, the word doesn't show up. But let me let me show you how this works out narratively. First of all, the younger son, for many years, sure, has been part of the family.

He's obeyed the father. He's he's talked to the father. He's eaten with the father.

So he's been doing what what a child, a son should be doing. He's been relating to and obeying the father's wishes and so forth as a as a Middle Eastern ancient son in a family would have done. But when he says, I'm tired of waiting for you to die.

Give me my money now. It means that all along, or at least for a very long time, the son had actually been after the father's things rather than the father. He'd wanted the father's things more than the joy and the happiness of the father.

He wanted the wealth. He wanted the estate and he wanted the comfort and the and the prestige and the independence that comes with having that. And he must have come to some kind of why in the road.

Something showed him that he wasn't going to be able to have his relationship with his father and still have the money he wanted. You know, for a long time, he was playing his cards so that, you know, I can have my father and money. But the one I'm really after is the money.

But when it looked like in order to use the money the way he wanted, he was going to have to cut out. He came to a why in the road and he chose the father's things. Why? Because all along his heart had been set not on the father, but on the father's things.

And that is a definition, that's a narrative representation of what the Bible says one of the main problems with all of us is, is idolatry. Why? You realize you can be in church, you can read the Bible, you can pray, you can obey the Ten Commandments. In other words, you can be obeying the father and you can be relating to the father and you can be praying to the father and all along have actually put your heart on the father's things rather than on the father.

What are the father's things? You want blessing. You want health. You want your life to go well.

You want your children to be fine. In other words, you're asking God for things. You're asking God for things.

And that's what I'm here for. And you know, as a pastor, I've seen this happen many, many times that younger brother idolatry, that's what this is, is a very, very hard thing to see. It's actually easier than elder brother idolatry.

We'll get to that in a second. But for a long time, it's not easy to see because you say, well, I'm living the life and I'm obeying God and I'm believing God. I'm doing everything right.

But then you come to a why in the road and there's a love or there's money or there's power or there's status or there's something you set your heart on that if you're going to get it, you're going to have to disobey the law of God. And so you know what? You say, give me mine. I'm out of here.

At that point, it's pretty, pretty obvious that, you know, you've been using God. You've been using the father to get the father's things. And if there's a choice between the two, you'll take the things because that's where your heart's been set.

Well, you say, well, that's not me. I can't identify with that because I've never cut out on God. Look, here I am.

I'm listening to you. You know, that, you know, I'm well, but there's another kind of idolatry and it's elder brother idolatry. You say, what do you mean elder brother idolatry? Let me show you something.

When the elder brother found out that the younger son was back, you don't have to, listen, it doesn't take, you don't have to have a PhD in psychology. If you're the elder brother, you don't need a PhD in psychology to realize this is the greatest day of the father's life. When he kills the fatted calf, the fatted calf

would have been able to feed 75 to a hundred people.

And, uh, uh, uh, back in those days, you almost never ate meat at a meal anyway. It was a delicacy. And the fatted calf, as you know, you can sort of tell was an incredible delicacy because it was, it was extremely, uh, it was lavish.

It was, it was, you know, you never did it. And so basically by killing the fatted calf, what he was saying, he's throwing a party for the entire village. It was probably the biggest feast the village had ever seen that he'd ever thrown.

But it was a way of, of, of expressing the fact that this, and you, you know, it's not, you don't need to, it's so obvious you lose a son like this. He comes back, you embrace him. This was the greatest day of the father's life.

Anybody could have seen that. Even the elder brother could see it. And it didn't matter to the brother because all the brother could see was the father was deploying his inheritance now in a way that he didn't approve of.

And it clearly shows that his heart had been just as much set on the father's things as the younger brothers, because he is ballistic. Now he is furious and he's humiliating his father on the greatest day of his life. And he's making his father, the middle Eastern powder familias come out to him.

Won't come into the feast. I mean, this is absolute awful. This is terrible.

And the, uh, and yet he's so angry that he doesn't care what he's doing to the father. He doesn't care because he's not that concerned about the father's heart. He's concerned about the father's things.

And here's what's so weird. Younger brother, idolatry shows itself in immorality and I'm going to go do what I want, but elder brother lostness shows itself in self-righteousness and lots of anger. Why? Because you see the father owes me.

I have been good. I have been slaving. I have obeyed the thing.

I've gone to church. I've read my Bible, but you see the anger at the father, if things don't go right, shows that you set your heart, not on the father, but on the father's things, you're not obeying him because of the beauty of who he is and the worth of his is due. You're not, you're not obeying him just because of, uh, just to resemble him and to delight him and to, to please him and to get near him.

You're in it. You're saying I signed up for some blessing and where is it? I've been a good guy. See, so there's bad boy idolatry and there's good by idolatry, but both destroy community and they're destroying this family.

They are tearing it to pieces. Now, how is it that, that, that idolatry tears up community? Now there is no better expositor of this. And I mean this then Augustine, Augustine.

In fact, he's the original. And when you've heard me talk about quote Luther or Jonathan Edwards or whoever else, it all comes from Augustine. And let me just, I would like to just take a little time here because those of you who come to Redeemer have heard this theme before.

Those of you who are newer have not heard the theme before, but I want to make sure even those of you who have come, you get a take that you haven't heard before. Um, to get ready for this sermon, I basically read the, uh, I just reread St. Augustine is one of the great books ever written. The confessions.

I hope you're satisfied. I had to read a whole, I had to read the confession. Just get ready for this sermon, please.

You know, you know, feel, you know, give me some credit. As I read it, I was amazed. I was amazed.

It's about this context. St. Augustine had a lot of trouble with two things, food and sex. So I, at first I said, nobody in New York is going to be able to relate to this, but I decided to go ahead anyway.

So, you know, he's a, you know, he's one of those great figures. So we, you know, I know it's hard to relate to somebody like this, but please think, Hey, in other words, as he put it, he just couldn't get enough of beauty, beautiful bodies. He loved beautiful smells, beautiful tastes.

He loved, but he began to realize that because he was so driven by beauty, that three things were happening to his life. One is he was always empty and unsatisfied. Number two, he was constantly doing things he didn't really want to do, but he kept doing it.

He couldn't seem to stop. Number three, he was, his relationships were always breaking up. It's trying to figure out what was wrong with him.

And he came up with a couple of things. He came up with a theory. And it's a theory that all of our problems come from what he calls disordered loves.

Listen, here's the first place in, in, in the confession very early on, he says this. So you say a man has murdered someone. Well, what was his motive? Either he desired the man's wife or his property, or maybe he was afraid of losing something to this man that he held dear, or maybe he had lost something to him and now he was burning to be revenged.

So let's ask this question again. Why does any man commit murder? Answer, every man who commits murder does so because he loves something, because he loves something too much. And that is the motive for his crime.

Isn't that interesting? You say, what? That's right. When you see murder, it's because somebody loves something too much. And he goes, he goes on and explains.

He says there's a splendor in all bodies that are beautiful to the eye. The sense of touch and taste have their own power to please. Worldly honor too, has its own glory as does the power to command.

The bond of human friendship has a sweetness all its own, binding souls together. But in the way we seek these pleasures, it's in the way that we seek these pleasures that sin is committed because we have an inordinate love for the goods of a lower order and neglect the better and the higher order, neglecting you, our Lord God, and your truth and your law. For these inferior values have their delights, but they're not equal to you, my God, who has made them all.

Therefore, when we inquire why a sin was committed, we do not accept the explanation unless it appears how his heart was set on some of those values which are inferior to the superior and the celestial goods. Okay, so explain. Material things, money, possessions, are not as valuable and as important as human

beings, right? Human beings are of a higher order of good.

A great roast chicken is of good, not as important as a human being. But then human beings are not as important and as glorious and as valuable and as good as God. If you put, and this is what everybody in New York is doing, if you put money and possessions over relationships, over people, over family, over friendships, that's a disordered love.

You're loving something as if it was first or second when it should only be third. It's a disordered love. But he says, if you love something, human beings, which is second, as if they were God, as if their love, their honor, their beauty is the ultimate beauty that's going to satisfy your desire for love and honor and beauty, that's a disordered love.

And all disordered loves lead to brokenness and all the problems you have in your life and all the problems you have in the world comes from disordered love. You say, how can that be? Here's why. Because disordered love, that means making a good thing into an ultimate thing, creates three problems in you.

He says it starves you, it emotionally enslaves you, and it divides you. First of all, it starves you. You know what Augustine's very famous, most famous statement in the Confession, but let me read you the run-up.

He says, what does ambition seek except honor and glory? But only you, Lord, have a glory forever that can never be lost. What does power of the mighty desire except to be feared? But none has power that can ever be seized and can stolen but you. What do the lonely and the anxious long for except a love that they cannot lose? But who can give a love that does not fade and die but you? What does weariness seek except rest? But what sure rest is there apart from you? Thus the soul commits adultery whenever it turns from you and seeks these things that it cannot find except in you.

O Lord, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. Now here's what sin is. It's not sinful to want honor.

It's not sinful to want love. It's not sinful even to want power, and it's not sinful to want rest. But the sin in our hearts makes us seek a kind of honor, a kind of power, a kind of love, and a kind of rest in creatures, in creation, in the Father's things rather than in the Father.

So we put our highest hopes for honor in how we're doing in our work. We put our highest hopes for love in some other human being or human beings, and that will destroy them and you. Why? First of all, they can't give it because that's empty, right? But secondly, emotionally enslaved.

There's a place, and I won't read it to you, where Augustine says the real problem, when you see something that you love, you want to repose in it. You want to rest in it. And the problem is there is no source of honor and love and power and rest that you can absolutely rest in except in God.

And this was the problem of the younger brother, and I mean, pardon me, of the elder brother. Because you see, his heart was, I'm going to get all this money. I'm going to have the whole thing.

I'm going to get everything now. But when it was jeopardized, he goes ballistic. Why? Here's why.

If you want a good name and someone ruins your good name, you're mad. But if you make a good name into the ultimate honor, because you really don't really know God, you're getting your good name from

what people, you're getting your self-image from what people say. If you make a good thing into an ultimate thing, and somebody ruins your name, you go ballistic, you may kill him.

See? To know that suddenly your father is giving away part of your inheritance, and you were expecting to have this much, and now you're only going to have this much, that'll make you sad. It would make me sad, okay? It'll make you sad. But when that is the ultimate thing in your life, when that is how you feel good about yourself, when that is actually, you know, the thing you've mainly set your hope on, and somebody starts to shrink it, then you go ballistic, and you know, you might kill.

That's what Augustine means. And here is the reason why, then, the ultimate reason why this divides us, why idolatry kills community. There is nobody like St. Augustine at explaining the beauty of the Trinity.

I know the Trinity hurts your mind when you think about it. I know it gives you kind of a brain lock, you know, as you try to think three beings in one God. There's only one God, but the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are all, you know, divine persons in the one God.

You know, what does all that mean? Here's what Augustine says. Augustine says, if the world is here by accident, if there is no God, then the meaning of life is, you know, ultimate reality is basically impersonal. And you're here because of powerful accidental eruptions and forces.

And secondly, he says, if there is a unipersonal God, a God that's only one personality, then that God would not have known love until he created the universe filled with angels and human beings, right? Because you can't have love unless you have more than one person. And if there was one God, a unipersonal God, before he made the universe, he would have had power, but not love, and only felt love later. Love would have come in second.

Love would have been peripheral, right? And therefore, if there's no God, then what life is really about is power. And if there is a God, a unipersonal God, then power is more important than anything else. It's first.

But if there, if the Christian God is, if God is the Christian God, if God is triune, then that means before they exercise their power to create the world, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, God was a community, a community of beings loving and knowing one another and communicating with each other. And that means that community, that means that loving relationships are the ultimate meaning of life. It's ultimate reality.

It comes before achievement. It comes before building. It comes before power.

It comes first. And the infinite happiness of God and of the love of God work like this. We know from what Jesus has told us, that the Father glorifies the Son, and the Son glorifies the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son.

What does that mean? Each person, each divine person serves the others, glorifies the others, adores the others, does not take glory, but gives it. And if we were made in the image of God, that God, then there's two bottom lines for our existence. Number one, your life is about community.

Your life is about loving relationships. That's what life is all about. If you come to New York City and do what pretty much everybody does, you put individual achievement, money, status, and advancement ahead of community, ahead of friendships, ahead of relationships, ahead of serving other people.

You're going to dash yourself on the rocks of ultimate reality. You were not built for that. There's going to be brokenness in your life.

But also, if you're made in the image of that God, it's not just that relationships in general are important, but you were built to do with God what God does within himself. You see, each of the divine beings center on the others. They don't say, me, me, me, me.

Each one gives glory and adoration to the others. And if we were made in God's image, you were meant to put God in the center of your life, to say, I'm going to serve God, not myself. I'm going to meet God's desires, not my own.

And if you do with God what God is doing within himself, you will know the joy because he will fulfill those great deep needs of beauty and for love and for honor and for power and for rest, and then you'll be able to give them to others. But if you try to seek for those things in other finite human beings, you know what's going to happen? You're going to be too broken up, too needy, too angry all the time like the elder brother, too addicted like the younger brother to care about others. You have to have your disordered loves healed so that God is the beauty of your life and the center of your life.

And the most important thing, you can't just believe in him. You can't just obey him. Then you might just be a younger brother or an elder brother.

You have to center your life completely on him and to say, I don't care what you give me. I don't even care how many prayers you answer. I love you.

I find you not just useful to get things. I find you beautiful and I serve you for who you are in yourself. Now, finally, and I did tell you this was an intro to the whole, there's so many features of the story that we haven't even begun to touch on, but let's just look at one more.

Remember what I said, what the commentator said a Middle Eastern patriarch would have done when the younger son came and said, you must give me my third of the inheritance. He should have slapped him across the face and should have driven him out with physical and verbal blows. And I'll tell you why most of us would do that.

Even if you're not a Middle Eastern patriarch, when you're hurt badly by someone, you want to staunch the wound. And the best way to staunch the wound is to turn your admiration and your desire for that person into anger and bitterness and sour grapes. You want to start saying that person, why did I ever see anything in him? Why did I ever see anything in her? So what you want to do is you want to close your heart.

You want to harden your heart. You want to fill it with anger and bitterness because that stops the hurt. And if he had done that, if the father had done that, there never would have been reconciliation.

Son would have never probably come back, but even if he had tried to come back, the father's heart would never have been open. So what does the father do? One of the things that the commentators always find fascinating is that it says there, after the younger brother says, give me my part of the estate, it says, and so the father divided his property between them. But the word property, the Greek word there is not the ordinary word for capital or property or possession.

It's very strange. All commentators point it out. For some reason, Jesus' story uses the word bios there, and it's the word for life, bios, biology.

And it's an intriguing word because here's what it's saying. The only way for this father to have really given the son a third of the property is, you know, they didn't have cash. You didn't have ATM windows.

It didn't work like that. They didn't have banks. Better for them.

The only reason that they, the only way he could have given a third of his estate would have been he would have had to sell his land. He would have had to sell his ancestral land. You know, in the movie Oklahoma, even in the movie Oklahoma, there's a line that says, oh, we know we belong to the land and the land we belong to is grand.

How sweet. But did you hear that? Listen, it doesn't say the land belonged to them. Did you hear it? It said they belong to it.

Because see, in ancient times, in older times, even in Oklahoma's times, a family's land was their, was their identity. See, that was my family land, my ancestral land. And therefore, what the text is telling us is that the younger son, because of his sin, the only way the father could keep open the possibility of salvation was for him to tear his life apart.

He divided his life. He tore his life apart. You see, the best thing that the way we would have dealt with this is the agony.

We would have thrown the agony on the son. We would have hit him. We would have beat him.

We would have turned our heart away from him. And that would have helped. But not this father.

This father suffered for his son's sin. He suffered for the possibility of redemption. He bore the agony of his son's sin so that eventually they could be reconciled.

Now, at near the end of the confession, Augustine finally tells us how his soul was healed. There's a place where Augustine says, you know, it's all about beauty. Because if I just sit there and I say, well, I guess I better love God more and put him before my family or otherwise I'm going to screw my family up.

Okay. I got to like God more and serve him more than I like making money because then that'll make me worry too much or do unethical things. Okay.

So, you know, and he said, you can't do that with an act of the will. You can't just say, well, I guess I better serve God first before everything else. What are you going to do? But what he does say is, you know, beauty.

We're made for beauty. He says, when you see, and this is Augustine saying, when you see a beautiful body go by, when you see a beautiful human being, you cannot but be attracted to that human being and want to go over and talk to him or her. In other words, when you see beauty, it automatically attracts you and engages action.

And so the answer to all of our problems, the answer to the breaches in community, the answer to all of our disordered loves is I've got to see God beautiful, not just believe in him in some general way. And this is what happened. Finally, he gets to this place in the confessions.

He says, how have you loved me? Oh, father, who did not spare your only son, but delivered him up for us. How have you loved us Lord Jesus, who though equal with the father became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Father, this is an amazing section.

Father, your son became both victor and victim for us. Victor, because he was the victim. Father, your son became priest and sacrifice for us.

Priest, because he was the sacrifice. Out of slaves he made us sons, because though he was a son, he became a slave and served you and us instead of himself. Rightly then is my hope fixed strongly on him and this will heal all the diseases of my soul.

There is nothing more beautiful. There is no more beautiful sight or even thought than that an infinitely perfect and happy being would descend into this world and sacrifice everything for ungrateful, undeserving human beings like us. That an infinitely happy being, who does not have to do it, would tear his life apart for us.

If you even get a glimpse of the beauty of that, it will heal the diseases of your soul. You will have to go after it. It will have to engage action.

It will center you on him so that you are finally free to love everyone around you. Let us pray. Our father, one of the reasons why we take the Lord's Supper is it's physical, it's palpable, it helps us take abstract thoughts and makes them real.

You have promised in your word that you would be present with us at this table. So now we pray that you would make the sacrifice of your son so real to us that we see the beauty of it. Like Augustine, we begin to get healed.

It's amazing that 1500 years ago somebody could write things that are so absolutely relevant. We thank you that you are the same God, yesterday, today, forever. It's the same gospel, yesterday, today, and forever.

It's not a matter of our modern western culture. It's a truth that has come down out of heaven, the gospel. It will change us and we pray you would help us in some small but significant ways to be changed by it right now.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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