

Fourth Sunday In Lent – Victoria Han

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I love this parable.

A father has 2 sons: one obedient, the other selfish. He leaves his father's house, but later comes back, realizing that his life without his dad is miserable. Despite his massive act of disobedience and selfishness, his father forgives him. This is a beautiful parable that encompasses God's never ending, all forgiving love.

Today I would like to focus on the other sibling. The one that is perhaps often forgotten about, the one that perhaps reflects the lives of some of us in this church, myself included.

For those of you who may not know, I am a missionary and pastor's kid. Born under God-loving and -fearing parents, I grew up continuously hearing about God and His love.

Growing up under missionary parents was not easy. Due to their ministry work, my brother and I grew up under the scrutiny of people around us. Any time we committed any sort of blunder, there was a tendency for people to go up to my parents and criticize them for it. They would go and say, "Did you see how your children sinned? Didn't they grow up learning the Word of God? How do you expect to minister to *us*, people from a different culture, if you cannot even minister to your own children?"

The smallest of our actions affected not only us, but the ministry of our parents. We grew up under the suffocating pressure and expectation to be perfect. This lack of mercy and understanding from people around us made me feel resentful. I was resentful of the fact that I had to suffer for a ministry that I did not choose, for a calling that was not my own, but of my parents.

Having no choice but to obey, I started clinging and holding onto the promises that obedience was followed with reward. If there was anyone out there that had given up a lot, it had to be me. After all, I unconditionally obeyed, preached His goodness even when I did not feel that He was good and served countless hours in the church. God would surely see how I set aside my feelings and qualms out of love for Him and to further His kingdom and reward me.

But over and over again, I witnessed how God blessed people like the younger son. People who stole, gossiped, disobeyed, never served and yet pretended to have much faith, people who seemed to have done everything wrong. Yet the moment they came back and searched for the Lord, God embraced and blessed them. He rewarded them when they served and did what I had already been doing for so long.

I knew I was supposed to be happy, joyful for them, but I just couldn't. How could God choose to give and bless people like *them* while *I* was here, forced to sacrifice and obey without uttering a simple complaint? While He Himself forcefully placed me under a situation where I had no choice but to serve? Didn't He see how hard this was for me?

God was so unfair. The more and more I witnessed this, I started to wonder if God loved them more than me. That was the only possible explanation I could come up with as to why He gave them so much more.

In my eyes, that elder brother had every right to be angry at his father. He had done everything right. He had stayed, obeyed, endured and yet his father never even gave him a young goat to reward him. And the moment that he finally could bear it no more and for the first time complained and lashed out, he says, “*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*”

All this time, all he had to do had been to stretch out his hand and take.

The elder son had spent so much time with his father yet had not realized that his father had already given him everything. He forgot to set time aside to spend with his father and enjoy what was already his. In setting his focus on solely obeying, he forgot to remember the reason why he had faithfully obeyed. He felt like a slave under his father. How and when did it start to feel this way?

He had obeyed because he loved his father, but in his pursuit of obedience, he forgot to enjoy his father.

God certainly does promise a reward for our obedience, but it is also up to us to reach out to that blessing. We see how the Israelites enter the land and enjoy the produce of the land. They don't enter the land and go straight into conquering it. They pause and experience firsthand the care and goodness of God.

We often say that communication is key to building a long, lasting relationship. God, our father, is no exception. It is only when we communicate our feelings and thoughts that we get to know each other better and clear any potential misunderstandings.

The elder son had never communicated beforehand what he had wanted. Yet Jesus told us so clearly, *Ask and it shall be given.* (Matthew 7:7)

Jesus Himself set the example of setting time aside from His ministry to go into the mountains and pray, to enjoy and talk with God. He gave thanks when He broke the bread, prayed and talked to God before he raised Lazarus, prayed and laid down his anguish, confessing how hard it was to obey before being crucified.

And now, Jesus has reconciled us to God. True reconciliation can happen only when both parties communicate and are honest with each other, be it friends, family, and even God. To reconcile, you have to let the other know what you are going through.

Jeremiah puts clearly: *Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord* (Lamentations 2:19).

Maybe someone in this church is currently feeling weary. Every day you battle with your own desires to follow the Lord. Every godly choice and word is a sacrifice for you, be it time, money,

or effort. You serve, you give, you obey and yet you don't feel fulfilled, you feel like God is far away, like God doesn't notice nor see you.

But remember the promise that Jesus gave us, *And behold, I am with you always, to the end of age.* (Matthew 28:20)

He is standing right beside us. So let's *go* and sit down beside Him, spend time with Him and replenish our tired and weary heart. Let out your frustrations, your fears, your happiness, your desires, your sadness, even if some of them stem from being upset at God. Pour out your hearts like water before him and receive His consolation. Enjoy His presence, reach out and claim that blessing. The work will always be there, but if we do not set aside time to rest, we will lose sight of what is truly important.

*Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O **righteous**, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

A few years ago, I finally decided to communicate to God my qualms, and I was surprised to see how quickly He responded. He blessed me beyond words; He showed that He was, indeed, a fair and loving God. In a particular night when I finally dared to ask "**Why**" of the Lord, He immediately answered the next day during church service. I had voiced out loud my feelings, my doubts my questions, and every single one of them had been answered in church service.

So you who obey, who follow, who are righteous: be glad in the Lord and rejoice, for all that is God's, is yours.