

An Empty Seat is a Really Big Thing

Look around you today, How many empty seats are there in our sanctuary? An empty seat is a big deal—As a church we have had many seasons of growth, and today we are in that position again. We are going to have to move to two services again in the very near future. At one time there were more than 10,000 members of this church, and you all remember the burning money era, well we opened 19 different congregations from this one church in the city to meet the incredible need of our people. Today all of our churches are maturing and growing—this is mission's month a season to emphasize growth in our churches and our lives as we reach out to others. Who should be filling the empty chair near you? I'm going to come back to that question in a moment but before I do I want to tell a familiar story...

On such a great day for thanksgiving, surprisingly every chair was filled except one. It was the chair right next to the robe-covered prodigal. It belonged to the elder brother. The good boy who minded his own business, lived by the rules and stayed clear of trouble was coming home after a hard day of chores on the ranch. He heard the commotion but was unaware that the fuss had to do with a surprise homecoming by baby brother.

You would have thought the news would have followed with a heartfelt reunion of two brothers. As far as he figured it, he'd never lay eyes on his brother again.

He was as good as dead. Come to think of it, the fact that his younger sibling ever had the nerve to come back mustered up some deeply negative feelings. The prodigal basically told dad he was as good as dead by asking for his inheritance before there was any talk of funerals. And while he ran off to live with reckless irresponsibility, who bore the brunt of responsibility back at home? big brother. And how could dad even consider throwing a party for a son that treated him so shamefully. Not to mention, how did he ever let him step one foot on the estate, at all?

It was more than he could stand. His hearty appetite seemed to fade with the news of celebration over his brother's return to the family farm. It was repulsive and he wanted no part of the unscheduled party. He refused to go in to the house - to welcome back his brother. No forgetting and no forgiving would come from him.

Then something happens, not sure if he sees his older son through a window or gets word of his refusal to join the party- the father steps out to urge his older son to join them at the table. The pleading must have been just too much for this son to bear. Like a dam that gives way, the older son breaks loose with great emotion all the feelings that he's held back for a long time.

Out comes resentment toward dad for not giving him such treatment. His brother's unbridled passions and wasted living embitter him. He is frustrated that he will again have to share the farm with his brother- the loser. The last thing in the world he wants to do is have a party- and he makes this

perfectly clear!

Here's the underlying question.

The controlling question for all of us-

HOW CAN A BLESSED PERSON BECOME SO EXTREMELY UNGRATEFUL?

If any one should have been absolutely contented, shouldn't it have been the older brother?

Amazingly doing all the right things, possessing the benefits of estate living are not guarantees of a grateful heart.

Looking at the interchange between father and elder brother, we discover some things that point to a heart plagued with thanklessness.

I. He was Performance Driven

V.29 "Lo, these many years, I have been serving you...I never transgressed...and yet you never gave me a goat"

Luke 15:29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

This statement uncovers much of the reason this brother lacked joy:

1. The older brother marks time
2. The older brother tracks behavior
3. The older brother feels entitled

(Nigel—gave a Million 15 years ago— faithfully comes to church — resents hasn't grown, taken responsibility— passed by)

II. He was Possessions Blind

V.31 the father reminds the son, "All that I have is yours"

Luke 15:31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

Bible ex. Nathan this way described David wanting Uriah's wife:

2 Sm. 12:2-4 "The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. **It was like a daughter to him.**" Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." READ IT

The older brother had everything but still felt he needed something more

Plenty of people miss their share of happiness, not because they haven't found it, but because they haven't stopped to enjoy it.

Cineas was disturbed at Pyrrhus's intent to go to war against the Romans. "Sir, when you've conquered them, what will you do next?" Sicily is near at hand and easy to master. "And when you have conquered Sicily? Then we will pass on to Africa and take Carthage. "When these are conquered, what will be your next attempt?" Then we will fall upon Greece and Macedon and recover what we've lost there. "Well, when all are subdued, what fruit do you expect from all your victories?" Ah, then we'll sit down and enjoy ourselves. "Sir, May we not do it now and forego all the preliminaries?"

The younger brother learned true riches out of his poor decisions, which brought poverty

vv.17-18 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants 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.'"

III. Older son was Relationally Distant

v. 30 "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

- He described his brother as “this son of yours”

was it motivated out of resentment or arrogance?

v. 31 "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

— The father had to remind him, “Son, you are always with me”

He took this for granted- he lived on the father’s farm but failed to learn the father’s heart

SO

- he could not understand his father’s nature

- he could not share in the father’s joy

Conclude:

The father ends his discussion with these words (32) **“It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”**

Luke 15:32 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.’ “

Another way of saying this is “An empty seat is a big deal!” A lost soul is a very big deal—

What should this mean to the older brother and to us? If we are unable to share in the joy of the Father's heart, something is definitely wrong!

But we too should feel the pain of our father, when we see an empty seat—and do all we can to bring every person—prodigal sons, or those who still have not heard of the love of God—to fill the seats at his table.

Lets look at the circumstances that invoked this and 2 other stories about lostness- **Luke 15:1-10** “**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."**

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls

her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

It's prodigal-like people that flock to Jesus. Why? They are drawn to the Savior because they are really thankful.

It's elder-brother like people that find this sight offensive.

In arrogance they are blinded by their own achievements.

They are consumed by a want for more- never really stopping to say thank you Father.

They have no room to love because they are keeping record.

DON'T LET INGRATITUDE ROB YOU OF YOUR CHANCE TO GET IN SYNC WITH THE HEART OF THE FATHER

Two ways you can move out of complacency —

Abraham **Genesis 12:2** "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."