

Breaking Free

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Today's scripture comes from 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 in 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 and hired himself out 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 had come 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.

[1 : 1 3] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. 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, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said to him, 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 this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.

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.

[2 : 1 5] 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 have been saving, slaving for you, and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when the son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes 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. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me? God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be pleasing in your sight, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen. So defying gravity, breaking free. So this past week, I spent some time learning about gravity as I watched in wonder and amazement as my plane took off and I watched the hot air balloons in New Mexico get laid out on the field, filled with air, and break free of the hold of gravity and soared into the New Mexico sky.

[3 : 44] So last week, Pastor Scott began the series by introducing us to a rich young man who couldn't break free from the financial gravity and accept Jesus' invitation to become a disciple.

He couldn't or would not submit one area of life to Christ, his wealth. So today we consider another rich young man who appears in the Gospels.

He's a character in the parable Jesus told about a loving father. He's the younger of two sons who feels financial gravity with such a force that he goes to his father and he asks for his inheritance early.

Can you imagine how that conversation went? The shock that the father and the family must have been in. The audacity for that son to announce that his father was living too long and he didn't want to wait.

My brother and I have a competition going on. There is a table at my mother's house that was my great-grandmother's and both my brother and I wanted. So we have our names on pieces of masking tape and when we go, we stick our name on the bottom of the table and when the time comes, whoever's name is on the top gets the table.

[5 : 04] My mom was not happy when she found out we were doing that. Yeah. So this son, right, this son goes to his family and says, regardless of what care you may need in the future or how you want to spend your hard-earned money, I want my peace now.

Parables often place people in particular scenarios that make their point clear. This young man wanted to pursue fully the kingdom of self.

He must have felt like he was the king of the world as he set his course and began to experience the pull of those distant lands. Having spent his life in that fairly confined space, he was excited to begin a real adventure.

What he didn't know was that he was about to be sucked into a black hole. A black hole is a place in space where gravity is so great that nothing can escape its pull, not even light.

That's why black holes can be felt but not seen. That effect is so dramatic. The kingdom of self is full of black holes and for most of us, myself included, we have trouble escaping that feel and that force of black holes.

[6 : 29] And for many of us, that black hole is our money. There are money in our lives that we can get sucked in by the wants and the desires and we become confused by what we really need in life.

For so many of us, money and the things it buys can produce a level of gravity for which we simply can't escape. We've all seen it happen.

Look at lottery winners. We've seen ads on Google or Facebook feed or advertisements for shoes that are on sale. That's my downfall.

We want to be seen as what the world says is successful. So most of us can understand this problem faced by the young man.

He's anxious to be independent but he was immature and immature people have trouble handling money. His vision was limited to a brief few hours into the future.

[7 : 39] It says, here in verse 13, he's been ready and it says, soon after the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

He was anxious to be independent but the immaturity led to a huge heap of trouble for him. His livelihood, his vision of living in the moment was short-sighted and he couldn't see beyond what was next.

He was living large and loving life until it was all gone. He spent every last denarii that he had.

He didn't know what to do and so he makes his way up that familiar road because he was so hungry and desperate that he felt he would go back and ask his father for a job.

and he was probably uncertain of what was going to happen. Have you ever noticed how such a large sum of money seems like a granite boulder that will withstand time until you discover that it's more like sand on a barrier island.

[8 : 56] It's quickly removed by tides or washed out overnight by a storm. How when you look at your bank account, you think it should have more in it or when you receive that credit card bill and it's so much higher than you thought that it was going to be.

The once rich but then very poor man in Jesus' parable eventually returns home. He knew he deserved his father's wrath but he was hungry and desperate.

And as he walked up that familiar road home, he was amazed when we saw the old man running towards him. So at that time, men in Israel did not run to anybody.

So you can think and imagine what that son would say. He's running. I'm in for it. Right? He starts to prepare his defense. Yes, he's certain that he's going to be in trouble but he doesn't realize the grace that his father had for him.

Think of how that experience must have changed that son's character. The father restores him to the family. He puts a ring on his finger. He gives him a brand new robe.

[10 : 17] It's like he had been brought back into the fold. It was the kindness that the son never felt like he deserved. It's a forgiveness that he didn't merit.

It was love and acceptance that he didn't think about. How that outcome changed that young man's life. How it changed his own spirit.

How it transformed him from that selfish boy that we hear about in the beginning of the parable. that young man died in that far off land and a new young man was resurrected that day because of the generosity of his father.

So I like to imagine that he now looked at the needs of others in a different kind of way that that extravagant living that he had squandered all of his wealth on was no longer appealing to him and being with his father and enjoying the company of his family and doing the will of his father and being more gracious and rather than just being the recipient of the father he was now a participant in what God and his father was doing in the world and he had a generous spirit about him but just like that pull of financial gravity could have hold of any of us we see it in our own prayer life we pray throughout any different day and often our prayers are about receiving things that we hope for long for prayers for discernment about a decision prayers for healing or reconciliation prayers for good food and for an ability and strength to continue to live a life well perhaps like me and you're a student you prayed for good grades and good friends for your kids or grandkids and that they're receive something from God rather than how we can serve God our desire regardless of how well intended is often to acquire or receive from God rather than serving God wonder how many times we actually pray as individuals or even as a church or a small group that God will teach us how to reach new people for Christ how often do we ask God to help us to become kingdom builders with God and in the kingdom of God how often do we ask God to show us how we can be a better neighbor how we can serve the needs of the hungry and the lonely and reach out to those who have gone off and lived those extravagant lives or those who may be on the edge of life themselves from my observation the ratio of prayers for receiving would be a whole lot higher than those prayers to serve there comes a moment of clarity for those of us who are followers of Jesus and when we break free from that kingdom of self we realize the joy that can come by helping another person by coming alongside someone and journeying with them in life a friend a neighbor a loved one our lives are changed when we break free from that financial gravity and from that sense of scarcity in life we want to join God in changing the world and we realize that we're called so much more we're called to be the kingdom of God there's a moment an epiphany for Christ followers when we recognize the difference between being that beneficiary of God's kingdom and being a participant in God's kingdom when you find yourself submitting your kingdom of self to the kingdom of God good things begin to happen the orientation towards God's kingdom kingdom is life altering it creates an identity founded in generosity generous people see themselves their lives and their purpose differently than people whose lives are weighed down by financial gravity generous people are more interested in what they can give instead of what they can get we become stewards

a steward is a person who manages another's property stewards have broad discretionary powers over how an account is managed or a household is run but they know that primarily they are servants looking not for their self interest but to the welfare of the owner Christ followers understand that we are stewards of a gift given to us by God a life with unique strengths talents abilities and resources to use in ways that are guided by God's own spirit that lives within each and every one of us we do this to glorify and honor the giver of that gift we see our life as caretakers of what is already God's rather than that it's ours most people in the United

[16:03] States live like owners if I'm an owner all that I have is mine and there's a book called The Paradox of Generosity Christian Smith and Hillary Davidson review the data and find that very large numbers of Americans despite wanting to enjoy happy healthy purposeful lives fail to practice the kind of generosity that actually tend to lead to happiness health and purpose in life something always gets in their way the book shares data captured in Smith's five year multidisciplinary science of generosity initiative that was released in 2010 the survey of 2,000 Americans along with in-depth interviews offers new insights to the positive outcomes of generosity when it's exhibited or withheld in the life of an individual or family think what they found was interesting 44.8% of Americans reported that they gave zero zero of their income to any charitable purpose not a single dollar they didn't put a quarter in one of those plastic funnels they didn't support the

Boy Scouts the Salvation Army the high school band collection the offering plate at church and then said I didn't give at the office either this is what people self reported another 41.3% gave less than 2% of their income away it means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S.

is offered by about 15% of the population you may be thinking well maybe those people gave of their time and time is valuable it is volunteerism is extremely important to charitable organizations but in the same study more than 76% of the people reported that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization that's 3 out of 4 people it seems like we have a famine of generosity that lack of generosity is not about resources it's about identity stewards understand that they are the custodial agents of whatever they administer they manage money and assets with the thought of pleasing the owner and not for themselves in order to become a steward of financial resources one has to accept the challenge to set aside an amount of money to invest in the work of God's kingdom many

Christians as a way to get serious about their desire to participate in God's work pursue generosity through giving to their income with their tithing as a goal a tithe is one tenth of your income the tithe was a practice that God gave the people of Israel the money from the tithe was used to support the worship life of Israel and to take care of the most vulnerable people in that society so why would God ask them to do this it's not as if the almighty is short of money or has lost the power to create it clearly God is not in need of a tithe but it's possible that the tithe is requested not for God's sake but for ours it seems clear that the tithe is intended to be a discipline that enables people to help expand God's kingdom as they give their tithe they become

God's servants through our generosity we gain a sense of identity that practice of proportional giving calls them to offer their best for God's kingdom as a way to live their identity as stewards so how does that practice of generosity change us Bishop Berlin talked about when he served a church in the Shenandoah Valley and he sat in the kitchen of a church member everyone affectionately called Miss Margaret she was in her early 90s and the topic of giving came up and she talked about how important it was for her life and the joy that she found in giving a tithe I don't know if you heard that but Miss Margaret was a single mom who raised her children up through depression and her first offering was to Christ she shaped her family and the life of her family through that generosity it was the center of her life so whether your tithe fits in a mason jar or charitable trust you can do the same the only way to gain her joy is to take on her practice as

[21 : 27] Christians we're called to be stewards of all that we have from our possessions and money to our time and our abilities so if you haven't volunteered the fish fry sign ups are in the back God calls us to be faithfully employed in God's service but all too often that financial gravity restricts and inhibits our true stewardship we hold so tight rather than letting go many people who love God and want to honor Christ and seek the will of the Holy Spirit haven't made that move from being a recipient of God's grace to being a generous participant in God's kingdom generous people know that they've been set free by God's grace and you know because of that parable that it doesn't matter who you are what you've done or how you've lived in the past none of that matters to God because just like that son in the parable who returns to his father and finds a generous welcome home we too can return home to

God and receive that generous and loving welcome a God that loves and forgives and longs to call us his sons and his daughters one of the ways that we can do that and we can start is through our prayer life so simple prayer I'm going to offer you three things to say I'm sorry thank you and please so I'm going to ask you that if you want to pray that prayer with me today I'm going to invite you to do that in just a minute and you don't have to say it out loud you can whisper it quietly in your own heart or under your breath so in just a moment we're going to pray that prayer together and some of you may not be feeling ready to pray something like that and that's okay you can just have a moment of silence and quiet and stillness but if you're ready and you want to take that step to turn back to

God to stay yes with us to say that Christ is alive that I'm ready to be a steward of God's kingdom that God is alive with us here and now and we can follow him each and every day so I invite you to pray with me now Jesus I'm sorry for all the times in my life when I mess up and please let God know anything you want forgiveness for forgive me of my sin and all I know that is wrong thank you for breaking me free from this life by your grace thank you for your gift of eternal life please fill me with your generous spirit and help me follow you daily in your holy name we pray amen you do have a couple opportunities left to have your picture taken for the directory please make sure that you do that and you do not have to be a member because you don't want me to come with my phone and snap your picture while you're sitting in your seat so the directories will be out after

Christmas so please if you don't have access to the internet or you can't find it on the website call the office and they will get you set up for an appointment pastor scott also has an announcement so there are a few folks who have been really taken by the video series the chosen and it's really been powerful and transformed their lives and there was an informal group that had started a bit of bible study around it so that group has decided we're going to come together and watch this movie that was put together by the same creative team it's a movie called his only son it's about abraham and that test he adored when he was asked to sacrifice to isaac so we'll be doing that next saturday next saturday evening and if you want more information about it come see me and i will share some more with you it's open to everyone so if you are able to join us come support the fall festival and then you can come and see us so may the extravagant love of god the father fill our hearts and minds and his embrace hold us when we feel unworthy to be called his children may the friendship of jesus our companion rid us of any notion that we are nothing and may we find our home with him in his kingdom may the spirit of life release us from a world of want so that a new joy wells up in our lives so let us go and reconfigure the world in our friendships in our workplaces in our families in our streets and in our entire world go and proclaim the story of our christ serving the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit amen