

4 - God loves me after all

Luke 15:21-24

(Play video)

My dad was returning home from a trip to Jamaica when a customs agent in Miami pulled him into one of the side rooms and began to question him. He asked my dad's name and occupation, standard questions like that. Apparently my dad resembled a well known drug dealer and this agent was hoping to make a catch. They looked at dad's briefcase and saw his Bible and notes, etc. So the agent let dad go. All dad could think was how thankful he was they didn't check his luggage because he had bought me and my brother two machetes from Jamaica.

What a case of mistaken identity! But even worse today, we have our identities being stolen.

Identity theft is the fastest growing crime in America. The number of identity theft incidents has reached 9.9 million a year, according to the Federal Trade Commission. Every minute about 19 people fall victim to identity theft. Total financial loss attributed to identity theft in 2012 was \$21 billion.

It can be very unsettling, and costly, to lose your identity.

Has anything like that ever happened to you?

Unfortunately, identity theft is becoming a frequent occurrence in our world. But what about the times when our identity isn't taken from us...what about the times we lose our identity on our own?

FYWBTG RECAP

Today we're continuing in our series Finding Your Way Back to God. This series is working our way through the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, discovering 5 Awakenings that help us find our way back to God, just like they helped the Prodigal Son find his way back home.

The first awakening is the Awakening to Longing. We feel like **there has to be more!** We all have a God-given longing to love and be loved in return, We long to find a purpose for our life that gives us reason to get up in the morning and look forward to the days ahead. We also have a longing to make sense out of life when life doesn't make sense. These longings are from God and can draw us toward God or away from him depending on how we go about seeking to fulfill these longings.

In the second awakening, the Awakening to Regret, we recognize how so often our attempts to fulfill these longings on our own take us further and further from our heavenly Father. We get to the bottom and say, "**I wish I could start over.**" And we easily find ourselves in this "Sorry Cycle" of longing and regret, longing and regret. Or we can come to our senses, and realize that with God, we can start over.

Which leads us to the third awakening that we looked at last week: The Awakening to Help. In this awakening, we make the turn that begins to lead us home. We admit we are powerless to fulfill our longings on our own. We admit, **“I can’t do this on my own.”** And we discover that help we really need has a name, and His name is Jesus.

This leads us to where we are today. We have come home. But even though we are home, the journey isn’t over.

These awakenings are not just something that happens when we initially find our way back to God; finding your way back to God is a life-changing moment, but it’s also a life-growing process, and just because we’re home doesn’t mean that everything is magically “fixed.”

Sometimes, even after we’ve come home, we forget who we are...we lose our identity. That’s why the 4th Awakening is so important. It holds the secret to our true identity. It’s the awakening to love.

God loves me after all.

In the epic story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son, the son has returned home, yet he’s still living with a mistaken identity. If you remember, the father sees him on the horizon, and his heart is filled with compassion. With a sort of reckless abandon, he runs out to embrace his son. Yet look at how the son responds to his father. He says in Luke 15:21:

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ (Luke 15:21)

Even after seeing his father run after him with mercy and compassion.

Even after being embraced and bombarded with hugs and kisses.

Even after all these unmistakable signs of the father’s love and grace, the son’s opinion of himself doesn’t catch up with his new reality – his new identity.

Maybe you’ve felt that way? Maybe you feel that way now?

You’ve found your way back to God, but your longings, the desire to be loved and have purpose and meaning... instead of bringing you closer to your heavenly Father, they have taken you to places that are far from home. You’re left with mountains of pain and regret. Sometimes you’re so burdened with shame you still doubt that God will accept you.

The prodigal son in our story was filled with shame. It’s almost as if shame was the shadow that followed him home. And you know what? Shame can follow us home, too.

Shame wants to cast a dark shadow over our homecoming.
Shame wants us to forget who we are and where we belong.
Shame whispers to us, “Who are you kidding? You don’t deserve this!”

Shame keeps us from embracing our true identity.

Author Philip Yancey told the story of a girl named Christa. Christa grew up on a small cherry farm in Traverse City, Michigan. She was a wild child who dismissed her parents as old-fashioned because of how they responded to her piercings and tattoos. One night Christa and her parents had a huge fight. At the end of it, she slammed the door and said, "I hate you," then acted on a plan she had been rehearsing for months in her mind. She ran away to the big city of Detroit.

Within a few hours of arriving in Detroit, she met a man who seemed warm and nice. He drove the most expensive car she'd ever seen, and he was willing to take her in. This nice man taught her a few things that would make her valuable on the streets, and because Christa was young, she brought in top dollar for her services. As time went on, and as she got a little older, she wasn't bringing in top dollar anymore, and so she was thrown out on the street, with no money and a drug habit to support.

One night she thought back to those sunny spring days when she would be lying beneath the cherry trees. Realizing that renting her body on the streets of Detroit was no way to live, she decided she would head north, maybe move to Canada and start over. On her way north, she figured, she'd try something that she thought had no chance of actually working. She mustered up enough courage to give her parents a call. No one answered, but she left a message telling them she was going to be passing through Traverse City on her way to Canada. If they wanted to see her, she would be at the bus station around midnight. After hanging up, she thought leaving the message was a stupid thing to do because odds were they were happier now that she was gone.

As the bus headed north, she could see the signs saying the bus was getting closer to Traverse City. She ran through the possible scenarios in her mind: nobody there to meet her; someone there, but only to shame her and condemn her. Finally the bus arrived in Traverse City, and she heard the bus driver say, "Fifteen minutes at this stop, fifteen minutes."

All her mental rehearsing didn't prepare her for what she found when she stepped off the bus. At midnight in this small-town bus depot, she found dozens of familiar faces belonging to aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, all wearing silly party hats. A huge banner hanging from the walls said, "WELCOME HOME, CHRISTA!!!" Her dad broke through the crowd and ran up to her, and as she tried to explain herself, he wrapped his arms around her, making it clear that all he really cared about was that his daughter was home. His daughter was home.

Yes, even after we've come home, we still need this 4th Awakening. Our shame keeps us from embracing our true identity.

Ring, Robe, Sandals

While the prodigal son was still shaking his head in shame, insisting, "I am no longer worthy to be your son," the father shouts to his servants:

["Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet."](#) (Luke 15:22)

The son's head had to be spinning. "Robe? Ring? Sandals? Uh...for me?" Each of these gifts from the father was proof of his love, and each conveyed a powerful meaning in that culture.

The robe was a symbol of rest.

At the father's command, the servants bring the best robe and put it on the son. The best robe in the house is, of course, the father's robe. The father doesn't give him an old robe or an extra robe he has in the closet. He gives his son his own robe.

How would it feel to be covered by your Father's robe? To realize that . . .

You don't have to run anymore.

You don't have to prove yourself anymore.

You don't have to strive anymore.

Everything is gonna to be okay. This is what home feels like. Now the son can rest.

The ring was a symbol of security.

Throughout history, if you were in the presence of a king, you would kiss his ring because it was symbolic of his power. Presenting a ring to someone was a sign of being placed in an office of authority.

The giving of the ring transfers from the father to the son all of his power and authority. The son who was broke and penniless now had the father's financial identity he could leverage as his own. It would like a father giving his son or daughter a credit card to take care of his or her needs. As the son looks at the ring, he knew he would... never go without a meal again, never without a place to sleep, never wanting anything.

The ring sealed his identity and brought him tremendous security.

The sandals were a symbol of acceptance.

In an ancient Jewish home, the only people who would wear sandals in the house were the homeowners. Slaves and servants went barefoot. (This is the opposite from where I grew up. You didn't dare wear shoes in the house!)

I imagine the son returning home shoeless. He came home destitute, looking more like a servant than a son. So when the father gave him sandals, he was saying, "Welcome home. You're not a slave. You're my son. We are family."

These three gifts told him the truth about his identity. He's not a loser or a stranger. He's not a slave or a hired hand. He is a son again. He is part of the family. That is his ID!

Awakening to Love

When I look at my own life, I realize that I am a prodigal. So many times I have lived under the shadow of shame and lost my true identity. I carry around all sorts of regrets. Regrets from years past as well as regrets from last week. I often DON'T feel worthy of God's love.

And maybe as you walk in here today, you realize you've lost your identity too?

That's why even after we find our way home; we still need this 4th Awakening...The Awakening to Love. Because it's here that we for the first time or once again we cast off the shadow of shame and realize that...

“God really loves me after all.”

When we awaken to love, we come to live in the reality that our true identity is a beloved son or daughter of our heavenly Father.

Author Brennan Manning says it this way:

”Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion. God’s love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life.” -Brennan Manning, Abba’s Child

The prayer in the 4th awakening is this:

God, please awaken in me the awareness that I am Your unconditionally loved child.

Let me ask you something . . .

Do you know that?

Do you realize who you are?

Do you understand that you are loved? You are forgiven? Accepted?

God longs for every one of us to awaken to love.

My hope is that when we walk out of here today, every one of us will walk confidently in the truth of our new identity.

Remember the Robe? You don't need to prove yourself anymore. You can rest and know that you are home!

Remember the Ring? You don't have to worry anymore. He promises to never leave you. You are safe and you are home!

Remember the Sandals? You don't have to feel alone anymore. You are unconditionally loved and you are home!

All throughout Scripture we see reminders of the identity God gives to us when we come home. Do you want to know a few of them? You're going to like this . . .

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old is gone, the new is here!”
-2 Corinthians 5:17) Your past is in the past. You are a new creation. You are home!

[“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...”](#) (Ephesians 1:7) Your sins have been forgiven. Your record is clean. You are home!

[“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”](#) (Romans 8:1) You are not condemned. Bye, bye, shame! You are home!

[“Nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.”](#) (Romans 8:39) You can never be separated from God’s love. You are home!

[“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”](#) (Galatians 3:26) You are God’s child. You will always be God’s child. You are home!

As we continue our journey back to God, we must push back anything that tells us we are not accepted by the Father. I love this statement made by Henri Nouwen in his book *Life of the Beloved*. He says:

“Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: ‘These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting belief.’” –Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

This is what awakening to God’s love looks like. When you understand God really does love me, you hold on to your new identity to the very core of yourself.

It changes how you think about God, about yourself, about others.

It changes who you are.

It changes how you feel.

You now know without a doubt that you have a heavenly Father who loves you as you are and not as you should be. You can stop saying, “I don’t deserve this,” and start saying, “God loves me deeply after all.”

Communion

One of my wife’s favorite verses in the Bible is 1 John 3:16...

[16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.](#)

The cross of Jesus shows us how much we don’t deserve this, because it was our sin that put Jesus there. However, we can stop saying we don’t deserve this and start saying “God loves me after all” thanks to the cross of Jesus. This is how we know what love is.

Let’s take time to remember and give thanks. Let’s pray.

(Video after prayer)

INVITATION

You can come as you are...

The prodigal son came home just as he was... the Father gave him a robe, a ring and sandals.

Then I love what happens next in the story. After the father gives the son the robe, ring, and sandals. He says:

“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.” (Luke 15:23-24)

What did the father do next? He throws a party!
He celebrates this son who was lost, but now is found.

Perhaps the best response to the reality that we are loved is to celebrate...to throw a party. So that’s exactly what we plan to do today!

If you are finding your way back to God, a crucial step in that journey is to be joined with Christ through baptism.

Romans 6:3-4 tells us: “**3** Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **4** We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Baptism represents the dying to our old self, the self that tried to live apart from God, the self that tried to fulfill our longings on our own.

As we are lowered under the water, that old self is washed away. And as we are raised out of the water, we come alive as a new creation. In baptism we declare our commitment to follow Jesus and live as a dearly loved son or daughter of the Father.

Today, if you are ready to accept your new identity as a beloved child of God, we would love to throw you a party. We’d love to celebrate your baptism!

My encouragement to you today is this: Come home. Awaken to the greatest love you will ever know and commit your life to following Jesus. You can make the decision to go public with that commitment by being baptized today. We’d love to throw you a party!

Today you have the opportunity to come home. So I urge you: Come home.