

**Parts of the Saving Passion:
Alienation**

Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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The last book Jeri Jackson recommended I read is *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J. D. Vance. It is the story of Vance's unlikely rise out of white poverty. He grew up in a decaying steel town in Ohio. He left there to enter the Marines, then to go to college, and then on to law school at Yale University. He now works as an executive in Silicon Valley. Some are trying to push him into politics.

He calls his Appalachian kinfolks hillbillies, rednecks, and white trash. He does not consider that an insult, just a fact. His people were sharecroppers, coal miners, machinists, and millworkers. They worked those jobs that paid little, taxed the body and mind, and that over the years have vanished or offer less and less security. He describes the despair of his people, the hopelessness of his community. His mother turned to drugs and became an addict. She couldn't keep a job or a man and was prone to violence and bouts of hysteria. His father was rarely a part of his life. His grandfather normally came home each day drunk. He describes his grandmother as a foul-mouthed, non-violent drunk.

His memoir describes the impact of hopelessness on his people and their culture. The men quit working and spent their days drinking and doing drugs. Families fell apart. Mothers neglected their children. The people then turned to government welfare programs. He writes, "Psychologists call it 'learned helplessness' when a person believes, as I did during my youth, that the choices I made had no effect on the outcomes in my life."

Hillbilly Elegy is a sad story of cultural cynicism, fatalism, and despair. It is about how a people became detached from each other, detached from hope for a better future, and detached from their real self.

Theologians and psychologists have another word for this. They call it alienation, a state of being emotionally and spiritually separated from others, from one's self, and from other parts of one's life that belong together. Adam and Eve belonged together in the Garden of Eden. Their relationship with each other and their Creator is presented as idyllic, until they yielded to the serpent's temptation. Suddenly they realized they were naked, became ashamed, and sewed fig leave for clothes. God came to visit in the cool of the day, and for the first time, they were afraid of God and hid in the bushes. They belonged together, with each other and with God. The story of Adam and Eve is an archetypal story of how they, and we, become separated–alienated.

We see two examples of alienation in that wonderful story from Jesus in Luke 15. We commonly call this story The Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I'm going to argue that is an inappropriate title. First, there are two sons in the story, and that title only recognizes one. And second, the sons are not the main characters. However, the two sons do share this in common: they became alienated from each other and their loving father.

The first son, the younger, is the one we call the prodigal. The word means wasteful. He said to his father one day, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me."

He was asking for his inheritance. Before his father died. Let me put his request into common language for you. He was saying, "Dad, I know you're going to die one of these days. I would just as soon not wait. Would you give me my inheritance now?"

Now dads, notice the parable does not say that the father took him by the throat and choked him. No, he didn't punch his lights out either. Didn't chase him off the family farm. The parable does say that the father gave his son the money.

Of course, the boy took the first train out of town to "a distant country." The King James Version calls it "a far country." Oh, he lived the high life, man. Parties. Friends. Everything was good. Jesus calls it "dissolute living." That means, "Unconstrained by convention or morality." Think sheer debauchery. Degeneracy. You get the picture, right? This

was a college town party, and he was footing the bill with his dad's money.

Everything was fine until the yield curve inverted in the bond market (as we have seen this past week), and the economy crashed. Suddenly all the inheritance money was gone. The party ended. The friends left. The music was over, and the younger son had to take a job, a Jewish boy, tending pigs.

A Jewish boy in a distant country tending pigs. It is a picture of alienation. He treated his father as if his father were dead. He took his father's gift and squandered it. Then he was forced to violate his family's religion by tending pigs. It is a picture of complete alienation.

How do you go home after that? Can you go home after that? Jesus says you can, and he did. Would his dad still be mad? Would he take a stick and run him off. He didn't know what to expect. As the boy approached the family farm, to his utter amazement, he looked and there was his father *running to greet him*. His father threw his arms around him and kissed him. He got the best robe and put it on him. He put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. His father then threw a party, and even killed the fatted calf. "Let us eat and celebrate," the father announced, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

The second son is older and more responsible. When the younger son returned home, the elder son was out in the field working, where an older, responsible son naturally would be. He heard the celebration music back at the farmhouse. He asked another worker what was going on. "Haven't you heard?" the worker said. "Why, your brother came home. Your father has killed the fatted calf, and they're having a great celebration. You better get in there!"

Here's the elder son's response, "Then he became angry and refused to go in." Do you see it? That's another picture of alienation.

So notice at what happens. The loving father leaves the party and goes out to find his other lost son. The father begged him to come in. But the elder son refused. He said, "All these years I have worked for you

like a slave. I didn't treat you like you were dead. I didn't take your money and waste it on prostitutes. I was your responsible, loyal son, and you never killed a fatted calf for me and my friends."

And that's how this story ends, we think. Some are troubled by the abrupt ending-the father out in the darkness trying to win yet another lost son. They suggest that the story originally had an ending that brought it to a neat conclusion, and that original ending has been lost. I don't think so. I think Jesus ended this story this way deliberately. The loving father is forever outside the celebration, in the darkness, trying to win his lost sons and daughters.

No, this parable should not be named after either of the sons. It should be called The Parable of the Loving Father.

Two sons. The first son became alienated from the loving father because of the hardness of his heart. He treated his father as if he were dead. The second son became alienated from the loving father because of the coldness of his heart. He refused to welcome his brother home. Like Adam and Eve, they both became alienated from one who loved and welcomed them.

Which are you? Maybe you identify with the younger son. You've been to the far country. You know the meaning of dissolute living. You've also shoveled out a pigpen or two. And you know how it feels to go home, fearing you may not be welcome, believing you do not deserve a welcome, but receiving it anyway.

Or maybe you identify with the elder son. I do. You never sowed your wild oats. You've been out in the field doing your duty, being responsible, and not noticing that your heart has grown cold.

A part of the saving passion is alienation, recognizing that their story is our story. And recognizing that the loving father is still welcoming his lost sons and daughters. It is time for you to go home?

Closing Prayer

Loving Father, thank you for the welcome we feel. Thank you for the welcome we receive. Thank you for home. Amen.