

“And Now The Rest Of The Story”

Luke 15:1-3

Today, we get to hear probably the most well-known parable in all of Scripture – the parable of the “Prodigal Son.” The first half of this story is one that even most pagans have heard. The prodigal son returning is applied to many situations. ESPN loves to use this metaphor when an athlete changes teams and then returns to play where he once did.

People know the story. At least, they know the first half of the story, but the second half of the story tends to go unnoticed. In the first half of the story, the younger son tells his father, “I wish you were dead,” and demands his inheritance. It sounds unbelievable to think that a child could say this or even think this, but that is essentially what he said. It seems unbelievable.

However, I recently rewatched this documentary series on the history of heavy metal music. This is not the music I generally listen to, but I have tried to study the appeal of it in recent years because 20% of all record sales would be classified as Heavy Metal. This is what your sons and grandsons in particular are gravitating towards.

I saw an interview with Dave Mustaine, the lead singer for the band Megadeth. Megadeth’s bass player Dave Ellefson is an LCMS Christian who in recent years has become active once again in his church – grew up in Minnesota. Dave Mustaine also, now confesses to be a Christian. However, in the interview, he was asked what his childhood was like. He

said, “It was all I could do to not kill my parents.” Their first album was entitled “Killing is My Business. . . . And Business is Good.” I am sure he can identify with the prodigal son.

As I said, lately, I have been trying to more deeply understand the Heavy Metal music culture. It is very popular (especially among boys and young men) and so much of the music is filled with anger, rage, and violence.

Many fans of the music will tell you that the music is a catharsis – it allows you to vent your emotion so you don’t explode. I suppose it serves the same purpose as watching a movie like “The Notebook” does for certain women that I know. (Now I am imagining a bunch of “headbangers” watching “The Notebook” and shedding a tear). That kind of makes me laugh.

I understand the value of a catharsis. It was the purpose of the Greek tragedies. Catharsis is a Greek word. This is the motivation behind Shakespeare’s Tragedies like Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet. I get it. However, not all forms of catharsis are created equal. I thoroughly enjoy Macbeth, while at the same time, I find Romeo and Juliet to be a horrible story. I could spend the rest of the sermon critiquing that play, but there is not the time and this is not the place.

The goal should be for the son to find a healthy cathartic release so that he does not wish his father to be dead, like the younger son in the parable, or Dave Mustaine of Megadeath, or the average Post-Modernist in America who has essentially declared or desired that God is dead.

Since music is such a powerful influence and is both cathartic and uplifting for so many people, the challenge for the faithful Christian in the world of secular music has been to find music that does not abuse the ears with the unholiness of the verbal crutch of profanity. It is out there. If your

kids tell you that they can't find cool music without profanity, they are either lying to you or just aren't trying very hard.

The question then is, "Why venture into that space at all? Why not just cloister yourself into the hymnody of the church? Then everything will be fine." That was the thinking behind the monastic movement, and forcing boys and girls to become monks and nuns was not really a great answer.

I believe it is important to try and understand and not simply dismiss the disillusioned, especially the young men in particular, who are searching – for what, they do not know. But a common theme within the heavier music tends to show an understanding of guilt and sin and the reality of the Law. And you hear that in this music more so than you do in other styles of secular music.

Now I am not promoting or advocating listening to heavy secular music. Certain bands mock God and have names like Lamb of God, Testament – the lead singer of the band Exodus says that he likes to sing about killing people, Norwegian Black Metal bands are notorious for being anti-Christian, Satanists, and openly hostile to the Lutheran Church in Norway and advocating burning churches down.

And in all the music in this genre, there is a struggle for the Christian to hear the Gospel, because it's not there. Not just the Satan-worship crowd, which, in reality (other than a few bands who actually do embrace Satan) is pushed more as a promotional scheme by the record companies than anything else – which speaks to the entire industry.

However, anything that does not honor God, the reality is that it honors Satan. That we cannot forget. Take the original Heavy Metal band, Black Sabbath, and listen to their first two albums, (after their third album, they were so drug-addled their musicianship went away). But on those first two albums, they understand the Law. And what makes their music truly frightening is that they play songs about being dragged into the fires of hell.

This is Dante's Inferno. Satan is not a hero in their songs. However, Jesus is not their hero either. There is no hero. There is no hope for salvation in their words. When there is no hope, that is when fear takes hold. There is nothing more frightening than to be completely without hope.

This is huge mission field. The Heavy Metal culture is much like the Gentile world into which Paul led his mission work. Paul went preaching to the tattooed, foul-mouthed pagans. And the Holy Spirit brought them to faith.

So back to the story, the son, after telling his father, "You are dead to me" then takes his inheritance and blows it. Like the headbangers listening to Black Sabbath, the younger son feels like he is being dragged into hell with no hope. A Jewish man is tending pigs – an unclean animal. Touching them makes him unclean. He is so desperate and without hope; he would even eat the slop out of their trough.

The Law has brought him low. We all know how the first half of this story ends. His father has compassion on him, embraces him, kisses him. The Father brings shame and humiliation upon himself: He ran to him. Children and thieves run. Men of honor do not run. And he embraces this ceremonially unclean tender of pigs – who from a hygiene perspective was undoubtedly unclean also; and he covers him in his best robe; and he puts the signet ring on his finger as a sign that he is once again part of this family.

This is how God works. In an act of compassion, God humiliates Himself hanging naked on the cross, takes away our uncleanness, washes it away in Baptism, and covers us in His robe of righteousness. That is a great first half of the story. But I have always struggled with the second half of the story, with the rest of the story, because of how the other brother thinks, and it reminds me too much of me. Amen