

Series: The Vision
“What We Are Called to BE”
By Kevin Haah (Luke 15:1-3; 11-31)



I. Introduction

Skit.

[Transition thought]

We are kicking off a two-week series on the vision of New City. Here's our vision statement. Each word of our vision statement is also our core value.

Our vision is to be an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ that connect people to God, grow together, serve the city, and extend God's kingdom.

The first part of the vision statement is about what we are called to *BE*: an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ; and the second part of the vision statement is what we are called to *DO*: connect people to God, grow together, serve the city, and extend God's kingdom!

Today, we are going to talk about what God is calling us to *be*.

What does it mean to be an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ? We are going to talk about four things:

1. What it means to be gospel-centered.
2. How being gospel-centered lead us to be inclusive.
3. How being gospel-centered lead us to be a community.
4. How being gospel-centered lead us to be lovers of Jesus Christ.

II. First, what does it mean to be gospel-centered?

[When we say gospel-centered, it does not mean we are focus on getting people to say the sinner's prayer; it does not mean we are focus on the gospel music; the gospel is the core teachings of Christianity]

When we say we are “gospel-centered,” it means we are not moralistic or religious: A religious or moralistic person essentially believes, “We must obey God's truth in order to be accepted by God.” The focus is on the truth!

When we say gospel we are “gospel-centered,” it means we are not relativistic or irreligious. A relativistic person or an irreligious person essentially believes, “We are accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true for us.” The focus is on grace or God’s unconditional acceptance.

The gospel says: “I am more sinful and flawed than I know (this contradicts relativists) and I am more loved and accepted by God than I can imagine (this contradicts moralists), at the same time.” Being gospel-centered means the focus is on both truth and grace. John 1:14b says: Jesus came from the Father full of “**grace and truth.**”

To help us better understand what this means, I want us to read and study the parable of the prodigal son. The focus has been on the prodigal son, but actually, Jesus starts out the parable by saying: “**there was a man with two sons.**” I think if Jesus named the parable, he would call it the parable of two sons. Let’s read it.

As we read Luke 15:1-3, 11-32, think about the underlying world view and assumption of each son.

READ THE PASSAGE

If you look at the context in which the parable is told and the parable itself, there are two kinds of people. In the context, if you look at verses 1-3, there were “sinner” and there were “Pharisees and the teachers of the law.” Jesus tells the parable in response to the muttering by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law that he is hanging out with “sinners.”

And if you look at the parable, there are two kinds of people as well: there is the younger brother and there is the elder brother. The younger brother represents the sinners and the elder brother represents the Pharisees and the teachers of the laws.

They represent two ways to approach God; two views of life and the world: the moralistic grid and relativistic grid.

The elder brother represents the moralistic grid.

- It’s the view of Joe in the skit.
- I worked hard, kept all the rules, and therefore, I am good.
- It was the view of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They were the respected religious people of the times. They pray regularly, they tithe, they try

their best to live a moral and religious and upright life. They want to be a good person and live by the rules. In other words, they were the elder brother types. They were church attending conservative heterosexuals.

- It was also the view of the elder brother as well.
- When I say moralistic, I mean more than legalism.
- It's the view that you are acceptable to God (or the world, others, or yourself) through your achievements and performances.
- All religions of the world take this view. We have to find out what the standards are, and we have to obey them.
- The focus is on rules, on the right moral living, the law, or biblical principles.
- The underlying assumption is that if you abide by these laws, you will be accepted by God and blessed by God. So, we should try really hard.
- It's sometimes comes as a wakeup call or fix yourself approach.

There are tons of problems with the moralistic approach:

- If you feel like you performed well, if you feel like you kept the rules—that you lived up to the standard, you will end up with a superiority complex. In the story, the elder brother believed that his moral uprightness means that his father owes him. He is full of pride. He is self-righteous. At the end, he refused to enter into the feast.
- If you feel like you didn't live up to the standard, you have an inferiority complex. You feel like a failure. So, you tend to focus on measurable stuff and pick on sins that you don't struggle with so that you can feel better about yourself. Even if you failed to live up to your sexual ethics, you might pick on homosexuality for example and judge them and look down upon them.
- Either way, you tend to judge, condemn others. You have a hierarchical view of people and you put them in a pecking order. It's just like the way the elder brother felt towards the younger brother.
- There is no joy or power even if they look religious. Look at the elder brother He's resentful. "I've been slaving for you." In his heart, he would have wanted

to do what the younger brother did but he didn't because he wanted to control his image or control his destiny by being good.

- What I am telling you today is that this is not Christianity. This is not the gospel!

But neither is the approach of the younger brother who represents the relativistic/self-discovery grid:

- You have to follow your heart, not rules. If there is a God, he would want you to find yourself.
- Many of these younger brother types are spiritual but the last thing they want to be is religious or subscribe to any particular religion. The basic tenant of this view is that "everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for himself." No one should tell them what is right and wrong.
- This is huge. This is what post-modernism is ultimately about. This view is very prevalent.

There are a lot of problems with relativism:

- In some way, you may talk a great deal about God's love, but they you don't think of yourself as a sinner, God's love for you costs Him nothing. God's love is not as compelling since it costs nothing.
- You can't say being relativistic is right either. If you do, then you are holding on to something absolutely, and you don't really believe everyone should determine what is right and wrong.
- There is no sense of justice or holiness of God.
- This position is not consistent with the Bible; so, you are forced to ignore all moral teachings in the Bible.
- If you take this position to its logical consequences, you don't have the foundation to critic evil. How can anything be evil when there is no right and wrong?
- The problem is with approach is that it ends up empty. You feel a sense of meaninglessness. There is emptiness in your pursuits. And at worst, it destroys you. There is a tendency to make the wrong choices. You get addicted. You run

away. You do whatever you want. You end up hurting people. The younger brother's pursuit landed him in a pig sty.

Our society is completely divided into these two paradigms.

- If you tell a relativistic/self-discovery approach person to accept Jesus Christ as their savior, they automatically assume that you are calling them to a moralistic approach because the world only knows these two approaches.

Both grids divide the world into two groups:

- Moralistic approach people divide the world into moral people and immoral people.
- Self-discovery/relativistic approach people divide the world into open-minded people and judgmental bigots.

In both cases, they believe that the world would be a better place if they undermine the view of the others. In some ways, this is the underlying battle in American politics: The fight between these two grids. They are the red states vs. the blue states. In some ways, liberals vs. conservatives. Secular vs. religious.

But, Jesus divides the world into the humble and the proud. The humble gets in and the proud does not.

The gospel is not religion or irreligion.

The gospel is not morality or immorality.

The gospel is not just grace—that God loves us unconditionally, it is truth as well.

The gospel is not just truth—that we are a sinner, it is also grace.

The gospel is truth and grace together.

The grace that God loves you more than what you can imagine.

And the truth that you are a lot more sinful than you are imagine.

The gospel is both at the same time.

What Jesus is saying is completely different. It's not a middle position between the two. What he is saying is radical.

We need to embrace both (1) the love of the Father; and (2) the depth of our sins.

1. We need to see the love of the Father. Before the younger brother speaks, the Father came running, he embraced him and kissed him. He kissed before the

repentance! It's wasn't like the father was tapping his feet while the younger son was accounting all the things he did wrong before the embrace and the kiss. We need to open our eyes and see this loving father. He waits for you (it says he saw his son far off), he runs to you (respectable middle-eastern men didn't run), kisses you, restores you, cleans you up, and feasts with the whole village (because you don't kill a fatten calf and celebrate with the immediate family only—you celebrate with the entire village). He is not the moralistic, condemning, judge. He is a loving father who is emotionally open and extravagant in his love. He loves you!

Even if you are the elder son, he pleads with you. Even when his elder son is humiliating him by not coming into the feast where the entire village is gathered, even in your pride, judgment, and anger, Jesus pleads with you. It's very interesting because through the story, Jesus is pleading with the Pharisees—come in to the feast! Come rejoice together! Wherever you are, you need to open your eyes to God's love.

2. We have to see our own sinfulness not only in our sins but also in our good deeds and works. The elder brother worked hard. He did the right things. But, he did it to control God, to manage God. To get what he thinks he deserved. We need to repent of that!

It is not the amount of repentance but the depth of your repentance. Don't you think the Pharisees repented of their sins? Yes they did. They felt very bad about their sins. The difference between a Christian and a religious person is that you not only repent of your sins, you also repent of the reasons you did anything good. Sometime, the main thing between you and God is not your sins (like the younger brother) but it's your good works (like the elder brother). Pharisees repent when they sin, but Christians repent of the reasons for their goodness. You are willing to see that all of the reasons that you were doing good were to control God. And you repent of that!

If you hear the stories of John Wesley, he said he became a Christian while he was a pastor. He said, he went from being a slave to a son. If you hear stories of Martin Luther, the great reformer, he became a Christian while a monk.

It is when they repented of the reasons for their righteousness that they became a Christian.

III. If we are gospel-centered, it makes us inclusive. How?

A Christian believes that he is a sinner. Yet, he is loved by God through what Christ has done on the cross. So, there is no superiority complex or inferiority complex. He does not judge. He does not condemn. Not because we think everything is okay but because we are all messed up. We are messed up in our sins as younger brothers, and we are messed up in our works as an older brother. If we are not in the gutter in skid row, we are in the gutter of pride.

Because there is no judgment, we can be inclusive. We can include everyone. We can truly be a come as you are church!

A moralistic person would have a hard time accepting the fact that he is a sinner because they would mean he is not acceptable to God. He has a way to categorizing certain sins that he does not struggle with and making it a particularly bad sin. I think that may be why so many moralistic people are homophobic. So, when the church becoming moralistic, it is impossible to be welcoming to the younger brother types when they are messed up and come home.

Just as the Father ran, embraced, and kissed the younger brother, we want to be an inclusive community that runs, embraces, and kisses people who are broken and messed up and in need of deliverance and healing.

Just as the Father pleaded with the elder son, and invited him into the feast, we want to be an inclusive community that pleads with people who think that they have it all together to repent of their goodness—for doing things to control God or to manage God.

Just as Jesus embraced the sinners, the poor, the sick, the outcasts, the prodigal, we want to be an inclusive community that reaches out to the margins and brings people to God with love and dignity.

We want to be a community that is like Jesus who attracted the sinner but challenged those who are moralistic and religious.

IV. How does being gospel-centered build our community?

In an authentic community, there has to be understanding and forgiveness. Moralistic people are not as forgiving. The elder brother didn't want to forgive his

brother. If are holding a grudge, you probably think you would never do that—and in some way, you feel morally superior. Be careful! I think people who understand their mistakes are more forgiving. For example, people who are late all the time, are much more forgiving to others who are late. In fact, they might be relieved.

When you are moralistic, you tend to get angry when things don't go your way. The parable says that the elder brother got angry and refused to go in. You have this feeling that God owes you because you lived such a good life and you get angry when things are not going your way. You have this sense of entitlement with God based on your moral behavior. So, elder brothers tend to be angry and upset. And often times, these angers destroy community. The gospel has the power to take away the basis for the anger by getting rid of this sense of entitlement and replacing it with gratitude. And that builds community.

When we are gospel-centered, we no longer build a hierarchical community. It's not about the elder brother helping the younger brother. It is both brother repenting and feasting together because of the love and grace of the Father. We are able to be vulnerable to each other. We don't have to look like we have it all together. The gospel gives us license to be honest about our sins and take off the mask. When the fear of judgment and condemnation is gone, we are safe to be an authentic community.

We can be intellectually honest.

We can be emotionally honest.

As we do so, we will build a strong bond, a family, a special place to belong where not only does everyone knows you name but we know each other's struggles and we are praying for each other and we are walking with each other and we are helping each other, and loving and caring for each other.

V. Lastly, how does being gospel-centered make us lovers of Jesus Christ?

The younger brother in the story asked for his inheritance before the father died. That is incredibly insulting. It's like he is saying, I wish you were dead. I don't want you, but I want your thing. There is no love. There is no relationship. In that context, the Father allowed the younger son to leave with his inheritance.

God does not want to force us to stay with him. He loves us so much that he lets us go.

But, when the younger son came back, and he experienced that amazing grace of the Father, he is going to respond in love towards his father. His life is going to change from the inside because he experienced the love of the Father.

Elder brothers have joyless mechanical obedience. The elder brother said: "I've been slaving for you." That's why some elder brothers explode at the end.

Christians obey God because he is beautiful and we find pleasure in him.

Also, the elder brother tends to lack assurance of the father's love. There is a sense that he doesn't really know how much his father loves him. He's not sure. How can he be sure when his approval is based on his performance? There might be some of you who have always wondered if God really loves you; it might be because you are measuring his love for you based on your work, morality, or performance.

God loves you so much that he sent his only son to die on the cross for your sins.

Some people say that there is no cost to the Father's love in the parable. So, the cross was not necessary. But, yes there was cost. If you look at the parable carefully, Father's assets were divided up into two, between the two sons. Since the younger son took his portion, everything left was the inheritance of the elder brother. That's why the father says: "everything I have is yours." That's literally true. The celebration took place with the unwilling elder's brother's inheritance.

We, however, have the ultimate elder brother. Jesus by giving us a bad elder brother, makes us long for a true elder brother.

- We have an elder brother who came from heaven
- We have an elder brother who lived in absolute obedience and fellowship with God
- We have an elder brother who went searching for us
- We have an elder brother who picks us up out of the pig sty and gives us his place in the family.

Do you know why we can have the robe of God's righteousness?

- Because Jesus was stripped naked on the cross.

Do you know why we can feast with the father?

- Because Jesus took the cup of God's wrath

Do you know why we can take his place?

- Because Jesus took our place and lost his place for us.

We have the true elder brother who paid the incredible cost to bring us home.

When we come to realize the costliness of his love for us, we can't help but to respond in love as lovers of Jesus Christ.

When we come to realize the beauty of who he is, we can't help but to respond in love as lovers of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.