

Lost and Found

Luke: Certainty of the Truth

Luke 15:1-32

Pastor Josh Black

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Does His Grace Still Amaze You?

As a teenager, I started a habit that continues to this day. I regularly lose my keys and my wallet. When I was younger, I got so upset when I lost my wallet and so excited when I found it. But as I've gotten older, I've become so accustomed to the process that I'm not as affected. I don't get near as worked up over losing my keys (after all, it happens almost weekly). And I don't get as excited when I find them.

I wonder if those of us in the church have grown so accustomed to the gospel that we're no longer affected by the amazing grace of God. Are you too accustomed to the message that God seeks and saves the lost? Are you too familiar with the bad news that we're dead in our sins? Are you too familiar with the good news that we can be made alive in Christ? Maybe you're no longer troubled by the fact that billions are lost in sin. Maybe you're no longer troubled by your own sin! Maybe you no longer get very excited about reports of people coming to Jesus. Is the gospel just old hat for you? Or maybe even worse. Has familiarity with the gospel bred contempt in your heart?

The grace of God in Jesus Christ is truly amazing. It should cause us the utmost joy in our hearts. That's what God wants for us this morning as we come to his Word.

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 15.

Our passage this morning is very familiar. It's the parable of the prodigal son. Or as some have rightly called it, the parable of the loving father. One of the challenges with familiar passages is we bring our preconceived impressions to them and sometimes miss the full scope of the wonders contained in them. I pray that won't be the case this morning.

The parables in Luke 15 not only speak of the lavish grace of God extended to rebels outside of the community of faith—although that's certainly a major theme—they also teach us how those inside the community of faith should respond to the grace of God. It's my prayer this morning that we would see all of this.

Sinners and the Self-Righteous

The context of this passage sets the stage. In verses 1-2, the tax collectors and sinners are gathering around Jesus to hear him. These are the people who would've been considered outside of the community of faith. We're also told that the Pharisees and scribes are there. And they were grumbling because Jesus was spending time with the outsiders. The religious leaders thought they had the inside track with God because they were righteous. But they weren't actually righteous. They were simply self-righteous.

They failed to see the reason Jesus came. Jesus came to "seek and save the lost" (Lk. 19:10). Jesus "did not come to call the righteous; he came to call sinners to repentance" (Lk. 5:32). Now that's not to say that the religious leaders were actually righteous or that they didn't need Jesus. They did need Jesus. They simply didn't *see* their need for him. Jesus wanted to receive the vile sinner. But he also

wanted the religious leaders to be humbled and see their need for him. And he wanted them to rejoice when the lost were found.

And so he told three parables. The parable of the lost sheep (15:1-7), the parable of the lost coin (15:8-10), and the parable of the father with two lost sons (15:11-32). The younger son was a lost rebel. The older son appeared to be righteous, but he was also lost. Actually the first two parables are parallel to the two sons in the third parable. There's an a, b, a, b pattern in this chapter:

- a. The sheep is lost and outside of the sheepfold.
- b. The coin is lost and inside the house.
- a. The younger son is lost and outside of the family.
- b. The older son is lost and inside of the family.

The sheep and the younger son represent the tax collectors and sinners. The coin and the older son represent the Pharisees and scribes. All were lost. And all needed to be found. The shepherd, the woman, and the father each represent God who seeks what's lost and rejoices when the lost is found.

And that's my sermon in a sentence: The Father seeks the lost and rejoices when the lost are found.

That's the repeated theme in all four sections. In each section, the person who represents God seeks that which is lost. And at the end of each section, we're told that when the lost are found there is much rejoicing (15:6-7, 9-10, 23-24, 32).

For the sake of time, we're only going to consider the parable of the loving father this morning (15:11-32). But hopefully you see how the first two parables inform the third.

Luke 15:11-32¹

¹¹And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him! ³¹And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

This is the Word of the Lord.

This passage is divided into two sections. The first has to do with the younger son who was lost outside of the father’s house. The second has to do with the older son, who stayed in his father’s house, but who was equally lost. As we consider these two sons, we’ll learn how a rebel should respond to God’s grace. And we’ll learn why the self-righteous rarely respond to God’s grace.

THE YOUNGER SON (15:11-24)

Let’s start with the younger son. What I’m going to do is walk you through this part of the parable. Then, at the end, I’ll give four points about how we should respond to the grace of God.

As I said earlier, there’s a sense in which this parable is not really about the prodigal son. It’s more about the loving father. And we shouldn’t be surprised. Ever since chapter 10, Jesus has been revealing to his disciples who God the Father is (10:22). And everything we learn about the father in this parable is teaching us about God the Father.

Ken Bailey probably did more to advance our understanding of this parable than any New Testament scholar in the twentieth century. Bailey was an expert in Middle Eastern culture and shows how Middle Eastern culture should inform our understanding of this parable.²

He says everything in this parable destroys the categories of how a Middle Eastern father should have responded to his sons. The father in this parable simply doesn’t behave like a typical Middle Eastern patriarch. That comes out at every turn.

In verse 12, the younger son asks his father to give him his share of the property that he has coming to him. In other words, he asks for his inheritance early. This would have been a major slap in the face to the father. In essence he was saying, I can’t wait for you to die.

A traditional Middle Eastern father would have struck his boy across the face and driven him out of the house. He’s expected to refuse the son his request, but the father in this parable “divided his property between them” (v. 12b). The relationship is now broken between the father and his son; the father is now dead to his son.

Now, it wasn’t unheard of to divide the inheritance before the death of the father, but it would have been completely unheard of to then allow the son to liquidate the inheritance. But that’s what we’re told happened in verse 13; “he gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country....” When it says he “gathered all he had,” it means that he turned it into cash.

The reason a father would never allow his son to turn the property into cash was it would bring shame on the family. It would expose the broken relationship between the father and the son. But the father in this parable allowed the son to sell the property.

² All that follows in this section is from *Jacob and the Prodigal*, chapter 9.

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jacob & the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

We know how the next part of the story goes. The prodigal son squanders his inheritance in a far country (v. 13b). But what you may not know is how serious that would have been for a Jewish boy in the first century. If a Jewish boy lost his inheritance among Gentiles, he would never be welcomed back into the community. In fact, if he tried to come back, the community would subject him to public shame and banishment.

So, the only way the prodigal could ever return home, after squandering his inheritance among the Gentiles, would be to earn enough money to recoup his losses. The prodigal tries to do this in two ways. First, he searches for employment in the distant land (v. 15). But as we're told, no one gave him anything and he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate (v. 16). Since his first plan failed, he came up with a second plan—a plan to go and work for his father as a servant or a slave.

His motivation for returning to his father was that he perished with hunger (v. 17). Another motivation may have been to earn enough money working for his father that he could recoup his losses and earn his way back into the community. So, he prepares a speech in verse 19, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

It's important to stop at this point in the story and say that the younger son has the problem all wrong. He thinks the problem is a loss of money. Therefore, he thinks the solution will come by working. But the real problem is a broken relationship with his father. And at this point there is nothing the son can do about the relationship.

What should the father do in a situation like this? A traditional Middle Eastern father would be expected to sit in grand isolation in the house waiting to hear what the wayward boy might have to say for himself.

But what does this father do? Out of compassion he empties himself, assumes the form of a servant and runs to reconcile his estranged son (v. 20; cf. Phil. 2:6-8)!

This father knows that his son will face the wrath of the community if he returns to the village. He knows that his son will face the shame of the community. So he develops a plan for their meeting. His plan is to reach the boy before the boy reaches the village and therefore protect him from the wrath of the community. And he subjects himself to shame by hiking up his robes and running to his son in full view of the whole community. The father takes the shame his son deserves.

The father's actions are not in response to the son's confession. They come before the boy ever speaks (v. 21). The father seeks and finds the son like the shepherd seeks and finds the lost sheep and the woman seeks and finds the lost coin.

Do you see how Jesus turns the picture of the father on its head? The picture of the father going down to reconcile the prodigal is the picture of God sending his Son into the world to save sinners. The Son of God emptied himself, assumed the form of a servant, and bore the wrath and shame we deserve on the cross, in order to reconcile sinners to the Father.

Jesus has also turned the way of salvation on its head. The Pharisees thought that the problem with the sinners and tax collectors was they didn't follow the rules. But the real issue was relationship. The sinners and tax collectors had a broken relationship with God. But so did the Pharisees. The Pharisees also thought that the way you made your way into the kingdom of God was by good works. Jesus shows us that our way into relationship with God has nothing to do with what we do.

It has everything to do with what God has done in Christ to save us from wrath and shame. It has everything to do with grace.

We can't approach God as slaves trying to earn his favor. We have to receive his grace and approach God as sons who have been restored to the Father by Christ. God initiates; we respond. And the younger son responded well. He accepted the free gift of his father.

The father said to the servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (vv. 22-24).

The son who once viewed himself as a slave has been made a son again. The son who was lost is now found. The son who was dead is now alive. The son who squandered his inheritance now is able to enjoy all that the father has. And the only response is to rejoice! The table is set. The feast begins. And all of this is because of the father. This is the picture of our heavenly Father.

This part of the parable also teaches us how to respond to God's grace.

- We must repent of our sins.
- We must receive God's grace.
- We must be restored to relationship with God as a son, not a slave.
- And we must rejoice when the lost are found.

This is what rebels, who know they're lost, do when they're found by God. This is what the prodigal son did in response to the loving father. This was what the sinners and tax collectors were doing when they encountered Jesus. And this is what we should do as well. We must repent, receive God's grace, be restored to relationship with God, and rejoice when the lost are found.

THE OLDER SON (15:25-32)

But this is not what the self-righteous do. This is not what the Pharisees and scribes did. And this is not what the older son in the parable did. Let's now turn to the second part of the parable and see how the older son responded to the grace of his father. As we walk through this part of the parable, notice how at every turn, the older son doesn't repent, receive grace, enter into relationship, or rejoice.

When the older son found out about his brother, we learn that he was not in the house at the party. He was in the field working (v. 25). This may be our first indication that even though he never left home as a rebel he was still outside of relationship with his father. How could he not know about this party?

But if that's not enough to show us that his relationship with the father was strained, we see it in verses 26-28. When he learns that his younger brother has come home, has been restored to the family, and that everybody is rejoicing, how does he respond? We're told that "he was angry and refused to go in" (v. 28). He stayed outside.

The first indication that a person is self-righteous is they refuse to rejoice when a sinner repents and is restored to God. That's what the Pharisees did. They grumbled when Jesus received sinners. They were angry at the grace of God. And that's how the older brother acted.

So what does the father do? He does the exact same thing he did with the younger son. He goes out to the older son. The father again exposes himself to public shame by going out to his son and entreating him to come into the party.

This is a picture of what God does. He not only seeks the lost that are outside of the community of saints, he seeks those who are inside as well. That's what we see in the Book of Jonah. God seeks the Ninevites who are the vilest of sinners. But God also seeks Jonah. When Jonah is sitting outside of the city of Nineveh, angry that God would save them, God goes out to Jonah and entreats him to rejoice at their salvation. But Jonah hates the grace of God, just like the Pharisees. And just like the older brother.

Instead of repenting of sin and receiving God's grace, the self-righteous want to earn rewards by their own work. That's what we see with the older brother. When the father pleads with him to come in, in verse 29 he says, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

Even though the older son stayed home and didn't run off to a far off country, he still had a broken relationship with the father. He didn't understand his father's grace and didn't value the relationship he had with him. His anger reveals his sin and his need for reconciliation and grace. But he clearly doesn't understand the need for grace.

The father responds to his son's anger in verse 31. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

Those who understand grace know full well that the only response to news that a sinner has been brought to repentance is to rejoice. It was fitting to celebrate and rejoice. Your brother was dead, and is alive. He was lost, and is found. Don't you understand how amazing that is?!

But the older son's unwillingness to extend grace to others shows that he doesn't truly understand his father's grace. His unwillingness to celebrate the restored relationship between his brother and his father showed that his own relationship with his father was broken.

It's interesting. This parable doesn't have a conclusion. We know that the younger son was restored to the father and there was much rejoicing. But we don't know what happened with the older son. The story is left open-ended. I think that's intentional.

I think that Jesus was making an invitation to the Pharisees. They were like the older brother. How would they respond to the Father's invitation to come in? Would they rejoice at the salvation of sinners? Would they themselves repent and be restored to the Father? That depended on their response to Jesus.

You see, Jesus received tax collectors and sinners. But he also desired to receive Pharisees and scribes. The problem wasn't with Jesus. The problem was they didn't see their need for him. And they refused to come into the kingdom of God by repenting of their sin and believing in Jesus. But it wasn't too late for them. The invitation was still open.

Conclusion

And the invitation is open to each of you as well. Where do you find yourself this morning? Are you a rebel who is clearly outside of the family of God? Have you turned your nose up at God? Have you fled to a far off country? It is my prayer that you would come to the end of yourself this morning. It is my prayer that you would come to see that all the pleasures of this world will leave you empty. That you would see that the things you're pursuing are like pursuing pig slop. And I pray that you would also see that our heavenly Father is a loving and gracious Father.

In the words of the hymn we sang earlier: "Come, ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore. Jesus ready, stands to save you, full of pity, love and power." I entreat you. "Arise and go to Jesus. He will embrace [you] in his arms. And in the arms of my dear Savior, O there are ten thousand charms."

Or maybe you're not a rebel clearly outside of the family of God. Maybe you've lived your whole life inside the church. But you're so accustomed to the message of the gospel that it no longer affects your heart. Maybe you know in your head that we're only saved by grace—that the Christian life is meant to be a relationship—but you've reduced it to a religion of works. You view yourself as a slave to God, not as an adopted son, bought by the precious blood of Christ. You too need to come to the end of yourself this morning. You too need see that our heavenly Father is loving and gracious. You too need to hear the words of the hymn.

"Come, ye weary, heavy-laden, lost and ruined by the fall. If you tarry 'til you're better, you will never come at all." Arise and go to Jesus. Let him embrace you in his arms.

Jesus came to seek and to save that which is lost. But until you realize that you're lost, you'll never be found. And until you realize that there's nothing you can do to earn God's favor, you'll never understand God's grace. I pray that each of us will be amazed by the grace of God this day.