

The Parable of the Lost Sons and the Prodigal God
“Discovering the Heart of God through Jesus’ Parables”

Luke 15:1-32

November 11, 2018

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And 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. ¹³ Not 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And 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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I 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. ²¹ And 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. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For 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. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And 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, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” Luke 15:1-32 (ESV)

This morning we are looking at what is probably Jesus' most famous parable, and for good reason. The main point of the gospel message – the Good News - is captured in this parable. It has often been referred to as “The Parable of the Lost or Prodigal Son.” But it is really a story about two lost sons and a prodigal God.

The word prodigal has two different meanings – one is at the extreme end of being negative and the other is at the extreme end of being positive.

Prodigal – ¹. Carelessly and foolishly spending money, time, etc; recklessly spendthrift characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure. ². Yielding abundantly, luxuriant, lavish, a prodigal feast. Merriam Webster Dictionary

The main story is about two brothers and each one represents a different way to be alienated from God, and a different way to be accepted into the kingdom of heaven. Just as it is a story about two brothers it is also a story about two groups of people who are represented by the two brothers. The first group is the “tax collectors and sinners,” that which are represented by the younger brother who it says at the very beginning of Luke 15, “were drawing near to Jesus.” The second group of people, who are represented by the older brother are the “Pharisees and the scribes” who it says “grumbled, saying ‘this man receives sinners and eats with them.’”

The interesting thing about this parable found in Luke, which is really a three in one parable concluding with the story of the two lost sons and the prodigal God, while throughout history many have focused on the first lost son – the tax collectors and sinners, Jesus was keying in on the older son – the Pharisees and the scribes, and it was probably not received very well by them.

In his book *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, by Timothy Keller, which is probably one of the best books on both this parable and the Christian faith (especially that it is concise and to the point) writes:

“The real targets of this story are not ‘wayward sinners’ but religious people who do everything the Bible requires. Jesus is pleading not so much with immoral outsiders as with moral insiders. He wants to show them their blindness, narrowness, and self-righteousness, and how these things are destroying both their own souls and the lives of people around them. . . . The original listeners were not melted into tears by this story but they were thunderstruck, offended, and infuriated. Jesus’ purpose is not to warm our hearts but to shatter our categories.”
Timothy Keller, *Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, p.10

I need to give credit where credit is due, much of my sermon this morning is taken from Timothy Keller’s book, *The Prodigal God*.

There are actually two acts to this story, just as there are two sons, and two types of people.

1. Act 1 – “The Lost Younger Brother”

The younger son was part of a very wealthy royal family, through no doings of his own. When his father dies he is going to come into a huge inheritance, especially since there are only two

sons. In the day the oldest son received double portion of what the other sons inherited. For example, if there were 5 sons, the inheritance would be divided by 6 and the eldest son would receive two of the portions and the other four sons one portion. Now you might ask “what about the daughters?” That is a good question. Daughters weren’t legally entitled to any inheritance. The best the daughters could hope for is that the man they were most likely to marry was the son of a father who also had a substantial estate.

But in our story there are only two sons, so the father’s estate, when he died would have been divided up in three portions, the older son getting two and the younger son getting one. Are you following me? But even smaller portions of a great big amount can be a lot. LaVonne Bell of the Pittsburgh Steelers has been holding out this football season because he just doesn’t think the Steelers are paying him enough at almost \$15 million dollars for the year. But he has to report this week or he can’t become a free agent at the end of the season. He gave up 8.5 million dollars. But he’ll get 6 million. I don’t know about you but I have a hard time feeling sorry for him.

The younger son was going to inherit something similar to that when his father died. I say “when his father died” because that was how it worked back then. To ask for a portion of the father’s estate before he died would have been seen as one of the greatest insults a father could receive from a son. It was like saying, “Father, I wish you were dead!” And the father would have had to go to great lengths to divide his estate up. It wasn’t like wealthy people just let all their money sit around or they had banks they could put it in. Most of it would have been tied up in property. He would have had to sell at least of a third of his property, property which made him more money. In fact the Greek word used there for property, in verse, 12, actually means “life.” The younger son was asking the father to tear his life apart.

One of the most extravagant or scandalous parts of Act 1 of the story is that the father actually gives what the son is asking for. The son takes it and he goes and blows it all. “He squandered it on reckless living.” It doesn’t say what exactly that reckless living was, but I imagine it wasn’t pretty or God honoring, and it doesn’t say how long it took him to blow threw it, but again I imagine it wasn’t too long. But soon he found himself as a hired servant, or worse, working in the fields feeding pigs, making not enough to even eat anything substantial.

Then it says, “he came to himself” (v. 17). He wants to return to the Father’s estate, not that he wants back in on what he had before, a son of the father who would inherit a large amount, or because he loved his father, he returned because he was hungry. He would be content with being treated like one of his father’s hired servants.

So he sets out to return to his father, some might say, “with his tail between his legs,” but while he is still a long way off (both literally and figuratively) his father sees him, and feels compassion for him, and runs towards him, embraces him and kisses him. Shouldn’t it be the other way around here?

Again, a scandalous and outrageous act by the father. Distinguished Middle Eastern men, especially patriarchs of wealthy families, did not in that day, nor do they today, run. And to run to him, hug him and kiss him? No way! It gets worse, he puts the robe of honor on him, the

signature ring of the family, shoes on his feet when all the servants went barefoot. And if that isn't enough he brings the fattened calf, kills it to provide choice meat, and celebrates with one of the largest parties anyone could imagine. How scandalous!!!

Act 1 ends with quite the scene. It ends with the Father demonstrating the lavish, prodigality (and though I might have trouble saying it – I assure you it is a word) of grace and forgiveness.

Timothy Keller writes,

“Jesus shows the father pouncing on his son in love not only before he has a chance to clean up his life and evidence a change of heart, but even before he can recite his repentance speech. Nothing, not even abject contrition, merits the favor of God. The Father's love and acceptance are absolutely free.” Keller, p. 24

Free, but it would come at a great cost! The end of Act 1. Would you like an intermission break?

2. Act 2 – The Lost Older Brother

Act 2 is about the older brother's turn to disgrace the father. He refuses to go in to what is most likely the biggest feast and public event his father has ever put on.

But just in case you might be turning your favor toward the younger son and away from the older, put this into perspective. By bringing the younger son back into the family, the father has made him an heir again, which means he gets 1/3 of what is left, 1/3 of what should have been the older son's inheritance. Where is the justice? How is that fair? The older son says, “I have never disobeyed you, what about my rights?”

The older son disses the Father almost as much as the younger son did. He doesn't address him by any name showing respect or honor. He says, “Look!,” which might have been equivalent to “Look you!”

But just as the father went out to the younger son, while he was still a long way off, he goes out to the older son and invites him back in.

We get to the end of the story of the parable of the lost sons and it is the younger son who has been found and the older one who is still lost.

But neither son is the central character of the story. The central figure in the story of the two lost sons is the Father, the prodigal God, who welcomes both lost sons to his feast.

God comes out to meet all of us in our lostness and the only condition to being welcomed home is knowing we are lost. Tax collectors and sinners are being invited to the banquet, Pharisees and scribes (who are sinners too) are invited to the banquet.

At the end of the story the bitter son is farther from home, just outside of the home in the field nearby, than the younger son was in the pigpen far away. Why? Because he has no conception of

his father's love – for his brother, or for himself. At the end of the story the older brother has no love for the father or the younger brother. One could ask, “did he ever?” At the end of the story he can't even refer to his brother as his “brother.” All he can say to the father is “this son of yours.”

While the Father's rebuke of the older son is tender and compassionate, the demand is clear. He too must come to the feast. If the older son would have known his father's heart, if he would have had the same heart his father had, what would he have done. He would have run into the house when he was told his brother had returned. He too would have been out looking for the younger son when he was lost and if he had seen him first, he would have gone out running to meet him.

During the Vietnam war, Army Lt. Daniel Dawson's reconnaissance plane went down in the deep jungle of enemy territory. When brother Donald got word of the news, he sold everything he had, left his wife with \$20 and flew passage to Vietnam. There he equipped himself with soldier's gear and wandered through the guerilla controlled jungle looking for his brother. He carried leaflets picturing the plane and describing in Vietnamese the reward for news of the missing pilot, his brother. *Life* magazine did an article about him as he became known as “the brother of the missing pilot.”

The older brother could have done more! If he really cared for his lost brother he would have done what Donald Dawson did. He would have pulled out all stops looking for his lost brother. That is really the heart of his parable. It is the heart of all three parables.

Each parable, the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son ends with a joyful feast to celebrate the finding of what had been lost.

Jesus tells us a little further ahead in Luke's gospel that the primary reason that he came to earth was to “seek and save what was lost” (Luke 19:10).

In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller credits a sermon he heard some thirty years ago by a man by the name of Dr. Edmund Clowney for his understanding of this parable.

It's amazing what you can find on the internet today. Dr. Edmund Clowney in his sermon some thirty years ago, entitled “Sharing the Father's Welcome,” said:

“We do not understand this parable if we forget who told it, and why Jesus Christ is our older Brother, the firstborn of the Father. Jesus is the seeking Shepherd who goes out to find the lost; He is the Resurrection and the Life who can give life to the dead; he is the Heir of the Father's house. To him the Father can truly say, ‘Son, all that I have is yours.’

“He who is the Son became a Servant that we might be made the sons and daughters of God. This parable is incomplete if we forget that our older brother is not a Pharisee but Jesus. He does not merely welcome us home as the older brother did not; he comes to find us in the pigpen [of life], puts his arm around us, and says, “Come home!”

“If we forget Jesus, we do not grasp the full measure of the Father’s love. The heavenly Father is not permissive toward sin. He is a holy God; the penalty of sin must be paid. The glory of amazing grace is that Jesus can welcome sinners because he died for them.” He died for us! Jesus paid it all!