

The Prodigal Son

*¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.
(Luke 15:10. ESV)*

Joy In Heaven
July 28th, 2013
Luke 15:11-32
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Luke 15. We are taking a break from our series in Ephesians this morning because we had the unique opportunity to have Jason with us and to see a portion of Holy Scripture acted out with rare skill and subtlety. The Prodigal Son is generally agreed to be the most famous parable in all the Bible. In fact a few years ago a secular sociologist named Marsha Witten conducted a study on the shift in Protestant preaching by comparing sermons on this parable from two large denominations in the States and comparing them against the general trend of American Protestant preaching in the past. What she found was alarming if not entirely surprising. She found that increasingly in Protestant pulpits this parable has come to mean simply that God is very forgiving and that all humans incline towards drift and wander but God will always be there to forgive us, because as the old saying goes, that's his job. She titled her study: "All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message In American Protestantism". Did you hear that title by the way? All is forgiven, the SECULAR message in American Protestantism. Keep in mind this is a non-Christian scholar writing for Princeton University Press and she has labelled the way this sermon is now preached in the Protestant church as essentially non-Christian. That is a fascinating rebuke and it shows up our tendency to edit and simplify these stories until they mean nothing more than what we want them to mean. But there is more here – far more – and I want to help you see it and respond to it by looking at the context in which this wonderful story was given. This is the third parable told by Jesus to address a specific misunderstanding and by looking at the context and the previous two stories we can position ourselves to receive the full message of this text. Look quickly at Luke 15:1-2. Hear now from God's Holy, inspired and inerrant Word:

¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:1-2. ESV)

Very obviously then, the occasion for this teaching was the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees about the sort of people Jesus was receiving. The text says that Jesus was receiving and eating with sinners. The disagreement assumed by the text illustrates for us one of the major areas of contention between Jesus and contemporary Jewish leadership. The Jews understood God as being Holy and therefore as determinedly inaccessible. Jesus agreed that God is Holy but spoke of Him as simultaneously welcoming and merciful. Behind this series of parables then lies a fundamental disagreement about the nature of God. The issue under debate is this: Can a Holy God be merciful towards sinners? To answer that Jesus tells three stories that mean to tell us the truth about God, the truth about sin and the truth about salvation. So let’s look at the two stories that set the stage for the Prodigal Son parable and organize our observations according to those three categories.

Let me read to you the first parable, the parable of the lost sheep:

Parable #1: The Lost Sheep

³So 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? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And 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.’ ⁷Just 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. (Luke 15:3-7. ESV)

In this story Jesus is telling us something very remarkable about the nature and character of God.

The Truth About God:

i. God is the one true seeker

This would have completely shocking to those listening at the time. A Jewish scholar commenting on this very text points out that in Judaism it was acceptable to speak of God as

welcoming a repentant sinner, but it was inappropriate to speak of God as seeking out the sinner. “God did not condescend to seek” they said; Jesus says: “Yes I do”.

Listen to me church, there is only one seeker we need to be sensitive to and it is God Almighty. Churches that style themselves as Seeker Sensitive need to know this: there are no human seekers! The Bible says this emphatically:

there is no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become worthless (Romans 3:11-12. NRSV)

There are no human seekers. There are people seeking God in their own image and there are people seeking a God who is less demanding than the God of the Bible, but there is no such thing as a person FINDING THEIR WAY TO GOD. What there is – is a God who seeks sinners. Thanks be to God!

The second thing we note about God here is that:

ii. God delights over every sinner who repents

This is really the main point of these parables. All of the parables seem to have as their main point the joy of God over every sinner who repents. Each of the three stories ends with a party – a party on earth that is mirrored by, in the first two stories a party in heaven. This makes sense when we remember the context. The Pharisees objected to Jesus’ receiving sinners and eating with them, but Jesus is saying: “God delights in every sinner who repents!” This is who God is, he says. He is a Holy God who delights in repentance. Notice that it does not say: “There is joy in heaven over every confused person who believes.” The joy of God is not over confused people who believe, it is over SINNERS who REPENT. Hear that.

In terms of the truth about sin, in this story we notice that:

The Truth About Sin:

i. Sin makes us stupid

Part of our problem in interpreting these stories is that we don't spend a great deal of time around animals anymore. A first century reader would have immediately understood what Jesus was trying to say here. Sheep are notoriously stupid. They have the smallest brain to body size ratio of any animal common to 1st century Palestine and so they had become proverbial symbols of stupidity in the same way that in our culture owls represent wisdom and elephants represent ponderousness and good memory. "Sheep" is code for stupid. Sheep are so dumb that they actually lack all sense of direction. They don't know where they've been and they don't know where they are going which is why they are known to charge over a cliff in pursuit of green grass. They will also run in circles at the approach of a predator which of course is galactically stupid. This is the animal version of fast food. You just spook a herd of sheep and wait as they all circle back towards your mouth. Sheep are dumb and sheep need to be rescued. Jesus is saying that sin makes us stupid. It robs us of sense and direction and it leaves us helpless before our enemies.

ii. Sin leaves us lost

Sheep are famous in agricultural societies for their ability to get themselves lost. They will climb hills in search of grass from which they cannot climb down. They will go into holes and fall over cliffs and fall into wells. Sheep are experts at getting lost but they are not very good at saving themselves. When a sheep falls down a well he doesn't knit a rope out of his fleece and make good his escape. He cries and he waits. Jesus is saying that sin makes us lost and helpless and desperately in need of a Saviour.

Thirdly in terms of what this parable says about the truth of salvation we notice that:

The Truth About Salvation:

i. Salvation is a work of God

As these three stories progress we learn a fair bit about how lost things get found. Our understanding of salvation grows and grows as we read these three stories but it is very important that we notice where it begins. It begins with the work of God and the helplessness of man. Notice that in this story God does not whistle – this is not a dog story, this is a sheep story. If

you lose your dog you whistle and it comes back to you. Whistling for a sheep is a waste of time. The stupid thing has probably fallen into a well or fallen over a cliff and it couldn't find its way back to you if it was sitting on your lap so you have to go get it. The shepherd doesn't whistle. He gets up, he goes out, he finds the sheep, he picks it up and he carries it home. Salvation is a one handed work. Sheep don't help. Salvation is a work of God.

ii. **Salvation is from and towards**

Notice that. It says in verse 6:

⁶And when he comes home (ESV)

Salvation is from sin and it is towards home. There is no salvation apart from a return to the Father's house.

Look now at verses 8-10 as we read the second parable:

Parable #2: The Lost Coin

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? ⁹And 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.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (ESV)

This parable is interesting for a variety of reasons; one of them is that this is one of the few places in the Bible where the character in a parable or metaphor representing God is a woman. This would have been very uncommon in first century Judaism but is just another indicator that Jesus is not subject to the limitations of his time and culture. The woman is obviously a widow and these coins represent all the money she has left in the world and therefore the loss of even one is a serious concern and thus motivates her impassioned searching. The point that Jesus is making here is that:

The Truth About God:

i. God is thorough and exhaustive in his searching for sinners

In his Olivet Discourse Jesus said:

¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed **throughout the whole world** as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14. ESV)

God will not be done searching out his elect until he has found them in all the nations of the earth. As a citizen of Canada, a land about as far from Israel as one can go, I am glad for this truth.

The second new thing we learn about God from this parable is that:

ii. God's joy seeks company

As the woman assembles her neighbours, so God assembles his angels so that the whole house can share his joy. Remember that this teaching was given because the Pharisees were grumbling about these new and unclean people being brought into the community of Jesus. There is a warning here that those who cannot share God's joy will need to excuse themselves from his fellowship; but alongside of that warning there is an obvious invitation. God is looking for people to join him in his joy and passion. God is looking for churches that will seek and celebrate true conversions. God is looking for churches that will float balloons over every lost sinner who repents. O Church, let us not become cynical. I know that not every profession of faith we celebrate matures into full and saving faith – I know that, I have the parable of the sower for that truth and I have nearly 20 years of pastoral ministry for that truth – but I won't let that truth rob God of companionship in his joy over every lost sinners who truly repents. Now I'm not God so I can't tell when a profession of faith is true and authentic so I'll just rejoice over all of them and I'll let God and the angels sort out when I'm wrong. As for me, I plan to err on the side of joy and I love that you join me in that. We'll err on the side of joy together and we'll celebrate every lost sinner who repents, praise the Lord!

There is nothing new in this parable about sin but Jesus does tell us one new thing about salvation.

The Truth About Salvation:

i. Salvation is observably synonymous with repentance

We could have pointed that out after the first parable but you tend to notice it in the second because it is repeated. Look at verse 7 and then look at verse 10:

⁷Just 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. (ESV)

¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (ESV)

Do you see that? In both stories the finding or saving event is interpreted with the word “repentance”. That’s compelling to me. Jesus doesn’t interpret his story by saying: “Just so I tell you that there is joy in heaven over every sinner who believes or who is found or who trusts or who says the sinners’ prayer; he says there is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents.” That is a powerful reminder to me that any invitation to salvation that does not put a heavy emphasis on repentance is not a truly Christian call to conversion.

That’s the background to the story we saw acted out so powerfully this morning. What we’ve done really is zoom out so that we can better understand what Jason dramatized in the story of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son parable is the climactic story in a sequence of three stories that were collectively given to correct the Pharisees in their understanding of the truth of who God is, what sin is and what salvation is. All of that content has to be carried forward into our interpretation of this third story. So in the time we have left I want to ask simply “what’s new” in the story of the Prodigal Son.

Parable #3: The Prodigal Son

I think the most compelling new insight in this story is that:

The Truth About God:

i. God is patient

It is interesting to note that in most other languages this story is not called The Prodigal Son as it is in English. In most German translations it is called The Parable of the Gracious Father and in many African translations it is called The Parable of the Father Who Waits. It is not terribly surprising that in the most self centered narcissistic culture in the history of human kind that we should miss the obvious point of these stories which is that God is gracious and incomprehensibly patient. He waits. He waits because he wants sinners to come home. We find that truth in story form here but we confirm that truth in many other places in Scripture. The Apostle Peter said:

⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9. ESV)

Peter said this to explain why the Day of the Lord had not yet come; 2000 years later we still ask that question. Why has Jesus not yet come? Is it powerlessness? Is it apathy? No, the Bible says it is patience. God desires that all should reach repentance and so he waits. He waits and he works repentance in the hearts of men and women. Thanks be to God!

This story also tells us several new things about sin; let me list them for you briefly:

The Truth About Sin:

i. Sin binds us into destructive community

This doesn't come through as clearly in English as it does in Greek. The verb in verse 15 is in the passive meaning literally: "He became bound to a citizen of that country". He fell into slavery. Slavery in those days was not about race as it was on this continent; it was about economics. If you lost everything and accumulated debts you were sold into slavery until you paid them off. The pig farmer must have assumed the young man's debt and then he effectively owned the man for a predetermined season of labour. The point is that sin binds us into all manner of awful things and one of them is destructive relationships. Sin is never conceptual or esoteric, it is bondage to evil habits and evil people.

ii. Sin leads us into degrading passions

Verse 16 says:

¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (ESV)

Again the Greek is far more explicit. The Greek literally says: “he began to lust after the pods that the pigs were eating”. He was lusting after pig slop. This is where the road of sin and rebellion leads us; how many of you know exactly what I am talking about? How many of you know what it is to LUST AFTER disgusting things? This is the end of the road. Sin leads us ever deeper into darkness, despair and soul crushing moral depravity.

Thirdly this parable adds an absolutely fascinating observation about sin that was never even hinted at in the previous two parables. With the curious detail of the older brother Jesus is telling us that:

iii. Sin sometimes disguises itself as piety, duty and superficial obedience

None of the other parables even hinted at that but it is not surprising given the context. The scribes and Pharisees were angry at Jesus for receiving sinners. What is Jesus saying to them? He is saying: “Are you so sure that you are not a sinner? Because some sinners never actually leave the Father’s house and yet they are estranged from him nonetheless”. This parable is telling us that all people stray from the Father even if some of us never leave the house. There are people here today who have been sitting in the same pew every Sunday for 30 years who are nonetheless strangers to their Heavenly Father. They look pious, they look dutiful – they probably have offering envelopes but in their hearts they are bitter and unforgiving and unless they too repent they will one day hear those awful words:

‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7:23. ESV)

This parable likewise adds to our understanding of salvation.

The Truth About Salvation:

It tells us that:

i. Repentance is hating what you once lusted after and loving what you once despised

This young man left his Father's house because he viewed the Father as restrictive, demanding and repressive. The world looked exciting, intoxicating and alluring. Then one day he found himself face down in the slop and everything changed. In a moment his eyes were opened and everything flipped. Now he saw the world for what it was and he remembered the Father's goodness. That is a beautiful picture of true repentance! Repentance is that gift from God that allows us to hate what we once loved and love what we once hated.

Secondly we see that:

ii. Heartfelt repentance unleashes an explosion of God's grace and goodness

The dramatic climax of the story is when the Father runs and embraces his son as he on his way home but still a far way off. The Father runs to him and meets him and showers him with favour and kindness and love and he immediately begins to restore him to the fellowship of the household. From the earlier parables we know that this is not the beginning of God's grace in the life of the sinner. We would remember here that God sought out the sinner when he was dumb and lost, we would remember that God found and carried the sinner home but here to all of that is added the grace that is gained through evangelical repentance. Grace upon grace is added to those who truly repent and come home. Repentance really does unlock the overflowing grace of God.

Far too often this parable has been hijacked to suggest that we can wander away ad infinitum and know that God will greet us at our return. That is not the message and if it were it would put the Bible into contradiction with itself for the Scripture also says:

²⁶For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27. ESV)

The message is not that we can constantly backslide, the message is that when we repent we unlock the riches of God's grace and we enter the fullness of God's fellowship. PRAISE THE LORD! The climax ends with these words from the Father:

²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (ESV)

The last thing this story adds in terms of our understanding of true salvation is that:

iii. Salvation is not about making bad people good it is about making dead people live

The Father doesn't say: "This my son who was confused, or this my son who was sowing his wild oats, or this my son who was going through a rebellious period has come home". No. He says: "This my son was dead". The Gospel is not about making sick people well, it is not about making confused people smart and it is not about making bad people good. The Gospel is about making DEAD PEOPLE LIVE. And only God does that. This is first and last a story about God! He is here in Luke as we met him two weeks ago in Ephesians. He is the God who makes ALIVE. This is who God is. He said of himself in Deuteronomy 32:

³⁹ "See now that I, even I, am he,
and there is no god beside me;
I kill and **I make alive**;
I wound and I heal;
and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. (Deuteronomy 32:39. ESV)

Old Testament and New Testament God is Holy – we should not fear the one who can only kill the body, we should fear Him who can cast body and soul into hell! God is holy and God is merciful and eager to receive every sinner who repents. This is the story Jesus told throughout his life and this is the story he told in his body on the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ is where the holiness and mercy of God meet and show themselves utterly and gloriously compatible. This is the God of the Gospel and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Jody, will you come and lead us in response?