

1 The Father's Surprising Love

Luke 15:11-31

2 The Background

In Luke 15, Jesus tells 3 stories about 3 kinds of being lost

- The sheep is lost to safety
- The coin is lost to usefulness
- The prodigal son is lost to fellowship
 - We have all heard lots of sermons on this latter passage
 - But most sermons here fail to understand the story from the perspective of the Jewish audience
 - That perspective is KEY to understanding the story

3 Luke 15:11-14

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

4 Luke 15:15-17

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

5 Luke 15:18-20

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

6 Luke 15:21-24

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

7 Luke 15:25-28

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

8 Luke 15:29-31

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I

at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

9 **THE PRODIGAL SON IN F MAJOR**

For the musicians among you....

10 **The prodigal son in F major**

Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his fond father to fork over the farthings and flew to foreign fields and frittered his fortune, feasting fabulously with faithless friends.

Fleeced by his fellows, fallen by fornication, and facing famine, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard.

11 **The prodigal son in F major (2)**

Fairly famishing, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from fodder fragments . "Fooley! My father's flunkies fare finer," the frazzled fugitive forlornly fumbled, frankly facing facts.

Frustrated by failure and filled with foreboding, he fled forthwith to his family. Falling at his father's feet, he forlornly fumbled, "Father, I've flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor!"

12 **The prodigal son in F major (3)**

The farsighted father, forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch a fatling from the flock and fix a feast.

The fugitive's fault-finding brother frowned on fickle forgiveness of former folderol. But the faithful father figured, "Filial fidelity is fine, but the fugitive is found! What forbids fervent festivity? Let flags be unfurled. Let fanfares flare"

13 **The prodigal son in F major (4)**

And the father's forgiveness formed the foundation for the former fugitive's future faith and fortitude.

14 **Many have a wrong picture of God**

- Typically, we labor under inadequate or inappropriate images of the God of Israel.
- We can be almost schizophrenic about Him at times.
 - We know He is a loving Father, yet He seems so stern, demanding and distant.
 - He's "Jehovah," the Law-giver, a kind of IRS agent in the sky who is ever examining our conduct, looking for just one infraction so he can throw the book at us.

15 **That image is wrong**

- This kind of thinking is neither Hebraic nor Biblical.
- It seriously impairs the very way you and I worship and relate to the God of Israel.
 - Who wants to crawl up into the lap of an IRS agent?
 - Who wants to practice the presence of a severe Judge who gives us an impossible law to live up to and then punishes us even for one infraction?

– It makes it hard to be intimate with God

16 **The real focus of the story**

- Too often this passage is preached as though it is ABOUT the prodigal son
- But the Real story here is about a Father rich in mercy
- The Jews that heard the story understood that truth

17 **THE SHOCKING AND CRUEL REQUEST**

18 **An unthinkable request**

- *And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.*
- With His first 2 sentences, Jesus grips the emotions of his listeners.
 - The request made by the younger son represents an unspeakable offense and is the greatest insult that the son could make to the father.
 - It is equivalent to saying, "Drop dead, Dad."

19 **Dr. Kenneth Bailey**

- Former chairman of the Biblical Department at the Near Eastern School of Theology in Beirut.
- During his many years in the Middle East, he often would ask people, "Have you ever known a son to come to his father and demand his inheritance?"
- He learned that such an act was unthinkable in that culture.

20 **Dr. Kenneth Bailey (2)**

- Dr. Bailey heard of only two instances of such a thing happening:
 - In the first, the son was chased out of his home by an irate father.
 - In the second, an Oriental father previously in good health, died within three months of his son's demand. The wife, who told Dr. Bailey the story, believed her husband died of a broken heart. She said, "He died that night!"

21 **What the request meant**

- Jesus' listeners understood that to demand your inheritance from a living father was equivalent to saying, "Father, I wish you would drop dead!"

22 **Jewish law**

- Jewish law permitted a father, under some circumstances, to settle his estate while still living.
 - For instance, if his wife died and he remarried, he could settle his children's estate right then.
 - This was done only at a father's initiative, however, never at a son's request.
 - Further, the actual disbursement of the property would not occur until the father's death, since he had the legal right to the land's income as long as he lived.

23 **A heart-rending story**

- In Jesus' parable, therefore, the younger son has perpetrated an unconscionable double insult upon his father.
 - He has shamed him by demanding his inheritance

- In other words, "Father, drop dead!"
- To add insult to injury, he insists upon the immediate disposition of his share of the settlement, thereby putting his father's future at risk.

24 **Then...the other brother**

- The other brother participates in the offense: *And he divided unto THEM his living.*
 - The elder brother, by Jewish standards, should have severely chastised his younger sibling for his disrespectful act, and then actively sought to reconcile him to the father and the family.
 - Instead, he takes his portion of the inheritance!
 - He, too, deeply wounds his father
 - He fails to demonstrate loyalty
 - He acts as though his father is already dead to him
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25 **THE PAINFUL SEPARATION**

26 **Luke 15:13-16**

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

27 **Alienated from family and friends**

- The younger son's conduct alienates him from his father, his family, and even his community.
 - The townspeople would have been outraged by his behavior.
 - Not surprisingly, he quickly cashes in his settlement and separates himself from his people and his land --something of supreme importance to people in Biblical times.
 - The younger son has severed every relationship and all his roots, and now he descends into wasteful living.

28 **A famine victim**

- *A severe famine comes upon the land.*
 - A terrifying specter to people dependent upon the soil for their very survival and sustenance
- What does the prodigal do?
 - He goes to a gentile, a pagan, and asks for help.
 - In the ancient world, if someone came to you and asked for a handout or a job, the polite way of refusing them was to tell them they could take care of your pigs.
 - It was a way of saying, "Thanks, but no thanks."

29 **A desperate appetite**

- This young man is so desperate, however, that he actually takes the job!
- The pigs in their hunger are eating carob pods.

30 **The emotional roller-coaster**

- First the audience has disgust and indignation toward the younger brother

- Now, they are empathizing with his terrible fate as the ultimate example of a lost person
 - No money
 - No food
 - No friends
 - No security
 - In exile
 - Eating with unclean animals

31 AN INCOMPLETE REPENTANCE

32 Luke 15:17-19

- *And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.*

33 3 kinds of servants

You see there were several kinds of servants during Biblical times:

- *Bondservants* -- served important positions in managing a family's estate and could become part of the family. Constantly under the direct command and authority of the master.
- *Lesser servants* -- slaves or servants working to pay off a debt; under the direction of a bondsman; more indirectly under the authority of the master of the household.

34 3 kinds of servants (2)

- Hired servants
 - Hired servants typically were artisans or skilled tradesmen
 - Today we would call these servants *independent contractors*
 - Hired for specific tasks
 - Paid wages and provided food and shelter
 - Unlike the other servants, they would not live under the landowner's roof and therefore not directly under his authority.

35 He still wants his own way...

- He wants to be the "hired servant" who is not directly under the father's authority.
 - He wants to maintain some pride and independence.
 - He is willing to work but wants to return on his own terms.
 - He wants his father's forgiveness but does not want to submit to his authority.
 - In other words, he will save himself.
 - He does not need grace; he has a plan.

36 He acts on his plan

- Luke 15:20 -- *And he arose, and came to his father.*
- Repentance is more than remorse; it requires action.
- Jewish rabbis taught 3 characteristics of authentic repentance:
 - recognition and confession of wrongdoing
 - resolve or determination to stop doing wrong;
 - actual and appropriate response of doing the right thing.

37 **OPEN AND UNASHAMED LOVE**38 **The real surprise in the story**

- Luke 15:20 -- *But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*
- People are outraged by the impertinence of the younger son
- They are stunned by the inaction and complicity of the older brother
- Now they are amazed at the reaction of the father

39 **No ordinary father**

- The audience thinks the father should have:
 - rejected his young son's improper request
 - severely punished or banished him for his rank impertinence.
- But this father surprises us by his grace.
 - Against all convention and contrary to every expectation, he shows love rather than judgment, compassion rather than condemnation.
 - He accedes to his son's request and gives him his inheritance. This is no ordinary father.

40 **How we often imagine this scene**

- We imagine a long, winding road leading up to a large house on a distant hill.
- It's South Fork and the Ewing estate on Dallas!
 - The father is sitting on the porch, maybe having his morning coffee. As he lays down his paper, in the distance he spots a solitary figure making his way up the dusty ranch road towards the house.
 - He calls for his wife and his binoculars, he looks, and behold it's his son! He grabs his boots and runs to meet him.

41 **What is was really like**

- Families did not live in isolated houses, not even farmers.
 - They resided near one another in a cluster or complex of dwellings.
 - Communal living was customary and socially comfortable in Bible times, but also necessary for security reasons.
 - They worked in the fields by day and returned to their homes in the evening.

42 **How Jesus tells it**

- Father lives in a community.
- Someone sees the son returning and word spreads quickly
- An angry and self-righteous crowd gathers to await his return

43 **Running the gauntlet**44 **Love without shame**

- It was considered demeaning and uncouth for an elderly person to run
- But this father runs the gauntlet of critical people so his son will not have to pass through their judgment
- Kisses son repeatedly
- Father sends a clear message to the community that reconciliation has occurred

– “Kiss and make up”

45 **A public reconciliation**

46 **Now we see real repentance**

- Verse 21 -- *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*
- This is the wording of verse 17 but lacks the words *make me like one of your hired men.*
- He is no longer trying to come to the father on his own terms.
- He is willing to submit to the father's authority.

47 **Why we often struggle with sin**

- We often struggle needlessly against sin because we think we've repented but we haven't really.
 - We devised a plan.
 - We decided to ask forgiveness, and then do some actions to atone for our sins and get back on an even keel with God – living life the way we did before we sin.
 - But we fail to truly repent and give that area of our life in which we are sinning over to the authority of God.

48 **Why we often struggle with sin (2)**

- We fail to submit to His will in that area and so we are doomed to continually repeat the struggle.

49 **A love celebration**

- Luke 15:22-24 -- *But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.*
- True repentance always produces joy.

50 **The father's celebration**

- The father:
 - Puts his finest festival garment on his son – showing his acceptance to everyone
 - Puts on signet ring, showing that the son is a free man, and not a slave.
 - Involves the whole community in the celebration by announcing, "Let's kill the fatted calf." (Would feed about 100 people.)
- The one treated as dead to the community is made alive by the father's mercy.

51 **FATHER GENTLY REASONS WITH HIS OTHER SON**

52 **An angry older brother**

Luke 15:25-28a -- *Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in*

53 **The beam in our own eye**

- We are most often irritated by things of which we ourselves are guilty

- The older brother had taken the inheritance
- He had participated in the insult against his father
- But he stays with the father thinking that makes up for his thoughtlessness
- Now his brother repents, but he has not – and that makes him angry

54 **The father reasons with him**

- In the end of this story, the older brother is doing what the younger brother did at the start of the story – he rends the social fabric of his family and breaks his father's heart
- The listeners are again expecting a stern reaction from the father
 - They expect him to order his son to come in and show respect
 - But instead, he pushes through the murmuring crowd to lovingly reason with him

55 **He listens to his son**

- The older son publicly humiliates the father
 - Verse 29 – I have been slaving (δουλεύω) for you for years! (Essentially saying, "You've treated me like a slave.")
 - This is not a private conversation
 - He distances himself from his father and brother by saying "this son of yours" rather than "my brother."
- His anger and resentment make him blind to the father's act of grace

56 **Jesus – Master of irony**

- Jesus turns the table on his audience
- The brother who deserved to be a slave turns out to truly be a son.
- The brother who seemed to be faithful shows himself to be utterly fickle.
 - He has rigorously lived by the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law is far from his heart.
 - In fact, his is a spirit of slavery, not a spirit of sonship.

57 **Jesus – Master of irony (2)**

- The prodigal was far from his father in space, but he returns an honest sinner and unites with his father in spirit.
- But the elder son, who physically remained with his father, all the time was distant in the spirit.
- Which one are you?

58 **The father's response**

- Luke 15:31-32 -- *And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.*
- Father refers to the younger brother as "this brother of yours," attempting to reconcile the 2 brothers.
- He assures the firstborn that his inheritance will not suffer.

59 **The father's response (2)**

- He pleads with the older brother to realize that the return of the younger son is an occasion:
 - For rejoicing, not of rights

- For mercy, not of law
- He shows the same surprising love to the older son that he does to the younger one

60 **Jesus – Master of the cliff-hanger**

- How does the story end? What will the older brother do? Is the family reconciled?
- Jesus ends the story abruptly, no doubt leaving the audience to think about it for days
- Only you can write the final act to the drama

61 **What will you do?**

- You have a Father full of grace and truth, faithfulness and mercy
- He has shown you surprising love that you do not deserve
- He has revealed Himself to you in His Son Jesus and in the written Word of God
- God – at every turn in our lives – surprises us with His love
 - Jesus ran the gauntlet; He took our shame and humiliation

62 **What will you do? (2)**

- He truly is a merciful and loving Father.
- Beyond both logic and law, He loves us.
- His great salvation is more than a legal transaction; it is a loving relationship.
- Even in our imperfect repentance, He rushes to meet us, bless us and call us His sons.
- Surely it is not difficult to turn ourselves wholly over to such a loving father.

63 **The main thing...**

- Are you out of fellowship with the Father?
- Return to Him today!
- He loves you and loves to forgive you.