



A FATHER'S LOVE FOR A WAYWARD SON

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke 15:11–24

53rd Message

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I have a horrible dislike of losing or misplacing anything. Upon not being able to find something that I want or need, I immediately go into a frantic and (according to my wife) obsessive search, to the extent of even rummaging through the trash. Nothing else matters until I find the missing item. And when I do find what I am looking for there is a tremendous sense of satisfaction and delight.

A couple of years ago I was getting ready to leave the house. I was gathering my gym clothes so I could work out later in the day, but I could not find my tennis shoes. I went into a frantic search all over the house but came up empty. I asked my wife where she put them. She took offense to that. Finally, my wife looked down at my feet and asked me if I was wearing the tennis shoes I was looking for. I left the house in rapid order.

Amazingly God shares my dislike of losing things, although I am sure he isn't quite as obsessive as I am. Luke 15 gives us a picture of God who goes to extreme and costly measures to search out and find what is lost. Sheep get lost, coins get lost, and people also get lost.

Luke 15 consists of three parables—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and what we know as the parable of the prodigal son. Bernard talked about the first two parables last week. Now we come to the third parable which is clearly the most well known of the parables to church-goers and non-church goers alike. This familiar story appears in literature, music, art and theater. We will spend two weeks on this text, focusing on the younger son today and next week the older son.

Let me remind you of the context for these parables, the first couple of verses in Luke 15:

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

The tax collectors and sinners were attracted to Jesus and his message while the Pharisees and scribes were repulsed by his actions of receiving and eating with these unclean and unsavory people. The idea of receiving implies that Jesus is treating the sinners and tax collectors with goodwill. This resulted in grumbling on behalf the religious group who wanted to keep themselves separate from the people of the land and those who worked for their Roman oppressors. The Jews grumbled in the wilderness when God wanted to bring them into the Promised Land. They wanted the security of Egypt. Now God is seeking to bring his people into the new covenant, but they want the security of religion and moral righteousness.

The three parables of Luke 15 are Jesus' response to the Pharisees and scribes. He doesn't give them a lecture, but rather tells them stories. There are actually four lost items and they spiral in intensification. There are 100 sheep and one is lost. There are 10 coins and one is lost. There are two sons and one is lost. There is one son and he is lost. The younger son, like the sheep, is lost outside the house. The older son, like the coin, is lost inside the house. Jesus is

inviting the Pharisees to find themselves in the story, rearrange their picture of God, and join the celebration.

Ken Bailey has spent many years living in the Middle East and studying this parable. According to Bailey, the story of the younger son and the father's costly love is told in eight stanzas that form a chiasmic structure. I will use his titles for each stanza that appear in his book *Finding the Lost*.¹ We begin in verse 11:

Death

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 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. (Luke 15:11–12)

The parable begins by mentioning the three main characters—a father and his two sons. We are to understand that this father is fairly wealthy, for we learn later that he had servants, a fattened calf, and the ability to hire musicians. The younger son is likely in his late teens since he is single. He makes an unbelievable request. He wants his inheritance while his father is living, which amounts to saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.” The possibility of this ever happening in a Middle Eastern village is quite remote. But if it did, the father would have boxed his son's ears, thrown him out of the house, and publicly disowned him.

By granting the son's request the father responds in a most unlikely way. He shows amazing love by suffering the hurt and pain of his son's rejection. According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the older son would have received a double portion of the inheritance, but that tradition was later modified and so the father could have given his sons equal shares. One would have anticipated that the older brother would have protested and jumped in to reconcile the father and his brother. But the older brother is silent.

The text says that the father divided his “property” or literally “life” between them. In this part of the world, land is not a living; it is life itself. Land means everything to family. Land is an identity. You might recall how Naboth would not sell his land to Ahab and Jezebel even though it cost him his life. The conflict today between Israel and the Palestinians reflects this same idea. Neither side wants another piece of land. They want “their” land, their inheritance.

All Is Lost

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. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. (Luke 15:13–14)

A few days later, the father did something else that was costly and remarkable. He allowed his son to sell the property. Normally the son would not be able to dispose of the property until the father

died. If he sold it before the father died, then the buyer would not be able to gain control until the father was gone. But the younger son is able to liquidate his asset. This is another extreme act of love by the father. He is willing to give his son complete freedom to do what he desires, which is exactly what God allows each of us to do.

The son sells quickly because the community would have been outraged at this younger son. He needed to get out of Dodge. Thus he packed his lunch and went far, far away. In the far country he did what many foolish professional athletes and Hollywood stars do—he threw his money away on extravagant living. Thus he is labeled as a prodigal or spendthrift, since he is extravagantly wasteful. There is no indication in the text that the prodigal engaged in immorality even though later on the older brother will accuse him of such.

Nature adds to the prodigal's misery – there was a famine. This was not a small famine but rather a mighty or strong famine and it would not have happened over night. In times of famine one would look to family for shelter, protection, and food. But the prodigal was alone and in need. He couldn't just call home and have money wired to his account. But a horrible sense of shame and fear of the community's response kept him from going home. Desperate, the younger son settles on another plan.

Rejection

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:15-16)

The word “hired” means to “attach” or “glue.” A form of this word is used to describe marriage in Ephesians 5, quoting Genesis 2—a man leaves father and mother and cleaves to his wife, i.e. attaches himself to his wife. This man was obviously a Gentile, since he had pigs. No Jew would have worked with pigs, but the son is desperate. His job might symbolize the tax collectors who were attached to the Roman oppressors.

The son had nothing to eat. No one was giving him any food. The pigs were better off than he was and he longed for the pods that the pigs were eating, probably bean pods from a carob or locust tree. The son had left home looking for his freedom but instead had become a slave in total bondage.

As Jesus is telling the story, the Pharisees and scribes would be thinking that the son was a sinner and got what he deserved. The son is also a picture of the sinners that Jesus was frequently receiving and sharing meals with.

The Problem

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! (Luke 15:17)

Many read “coming to himself” as a sign of repentance. But this would change the picture of repentance we see in the lost sheep and lost coin parables. The lost sheep and lost coin did nothing in terms of being found. Bailey defines repentance as the “acceptance of being found”.² Rather the prodigal starts to get smart. He recalls the fact that his father hires servants to do work and they have plenty to eat. The prodigal is hungry and so he hatches a plan. This is what all of us do. We don't want to be totally exposed and vulnerable and so we

devise plans and try to spin the situation so we don't look so bad. Pride runs very deep in all of us.

The Solution

I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “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.” And he arose and came to his father. (Luke 15:18–20)

The word for “hired servant” is *misthios*, not the word for house slave, *doulos*, or table waiter, *diakonos*. There are mixed opinions as to the meaning of this word. Some think it is the lowest of the servants, a common day laborer, while Bailey thinks it is the word for a craftsman. In either case the prodigal plans to go to his father, show humility with the correct language, and then ask him for help in either getting trained as a craftsman or hiring him as a day laborer. The son could then earn his own money, something that slaves could not do. He could live independently from his father and brother and in time perhaps repay his father for his lost inheritance. This plan would have sounded very good to the Pharisees and scribes—confession, restoration, and commitment to the live by the law. But this isn't what happens.

Acceptance

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

Suddenly the story turns and the spotlight shifts from the prodigal to the father. The prodigal comes near to the town but is still far away. The father sees him at a distance and is deeply moved with compassion, overwhelmed with gut-wrenching feelings of empathy and kindness. The father did not go out looking for his son in the far country, but he still goes to him while he is far away. He initiates the action and bridges the chasm between himself and his son. My sense is that the father had been looking for a long time, perhaps many years, and planned his actions ahead of time.

By running to meet his son, he saves him from the shame of walking through town and facing the hostility of the community. The father would have been wearing a long robe, a robe that reached to the ground. No man would have run in the fashion of the father because it would have meant hiking up his robe and exposing his hairy legs, a very shameful act.

When the father reaches his son he embraces him, literally falls on his neck, and affectingly kisses him again and again. The kiss is a sign of forgiveness and reconciliation. One could have imagined the son falling on his face and kissing his father's feet but not this. The father's actions are dramatic and all take place before the son speaks. The father humbles himself publicly since the whole village would have been watching.

Here we see a picture of the incarnation. God left his home and ran down the street, in order to draw near to sinners and tax collectors who are far off. Jesus is the good shepherd, the good woman, and now becomes the compassionate father, searching for what is lost. Like the father, Jesus humbles himself publicly and allows himself to be humiliated on a cross in order to redeem lost people, all before we do anything. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

All Is Restored

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.' 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. (Luke 15:21-22)

The son finally speaks using his prepared words. However, he omits the last part, the part about being a hired servant. Based on what the father has just done, to talk of being a hired servant would have been insulting. The father doesn't interrupt the son. Rather it is an indication that the son accepts his father's grace and thus accepts being found. He knows he is not worthy of what the father is giving, but he accepts it anyway. Instead of being attached to the Gentile farmer, he is now attached to the father. All he is doing is receiving what the father offers, which is exactly what the sinners and tax collectors are doing in relation to Jesus. Jesus is finding; sinners are accepting being found.

The father sees his son in tattered clothes and gives him a new wardrobe. He honors his son with his best robe, the robe that the father would have worn on special occasions, his festival robe. He gives him a ring, perhaps a signet ring, a sign of trust. The son most likely arrives barefoot and so the father asks his servants to give his son shoes, a sign of respect and freedom. This new wardrobe points to our being clothed with Christ and receiving Isaiah's robes of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10)

Resurrection

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.' And they began to celebrate." (Luke 15:23-24)

The father throws a large party of celebration just like the good shepherd and the good woman. A fattened calf was eaten on very special occasions and would have fed a hundred people or more. Not only is the son reconciled to the father, but to the entire community. The reason for the celebration was because a son that was dead came alive, he was lost and was found. He is "alive again" in the sense of being born again; "Even when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:5).

The celebration in the first two parables didn't honor the sheep or the coin, but rather the integrity and honor of the shepherd and the woman. There was a celebration of their costly actions to find what they'd lost. And so here the party not only rejoices in the son who is resurrected, but also celebrates the costly actions of the father who found his son. Not only does God love us, but also finds us "for his name's sake" (Ezekiel 36:22-23; Psalm 23:3). "I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). The celebration on earth reflects the joy in heaven.

The story of the younger son is a heart-warming story with a happy ending. The themes of the first two parables are repeated—lost, found, and joyful celebration. A movie with this same story line can easily move us to tears. We absolutely love stories of redemption and transformed life because if it can happen out there it can happen with us. God loves these stories too.

All of us get lost one way or another and like the younger son many of us get lost outside the home. We rebel, run away, and go to a far country. We squander our resources. We leave home looking for freedom and life but more often than not we end up in bondage.

God never forces us into a relationship. He loves us enough to give us freedom even if he suffers the pain of rejection.

There is so much to say, but I want us to reflect on just two questions. First, have you allowed yourself to be embraced by the dramatic, unconditional love and acceptance of the father in the way that the younger son experienced?

Jesus gives us an incredible picture of our heavenly father. He doesn't give a list of adjectives but rather he tells a very human story. God is like a father who searches and waits and brings us home when we are far away. God is like a father who runs to us and puts his head on our shoulder. God is like a father who won't settle for us being a servant but wants us to be his son or daughter. God is like a father who isn't resentful of the pain he has endured, and doesn't withhold his love because of the money and years we have wasted. God makes the first move and carries the burden of having a restored relationship. All we have to do is accept and receive.

Perhaps our picture of God is different than what Jesus paints. Perhaps we have viewed God as a stern taskmaster or as a distant and uninvolved parent. Perhaps we need to take that picture off the wall and replace it with a picture of the father we see in the parable.

Perhaps we don't feel worthy of receiving such abundant and lavish grace from God. The younger son says that he is not worthy to be a son. But he does not determine his worth. His sin does not determine his worth. The father determines the son's worth through his actions. Like the coin lost in the house, the son retains his value to the father even when he is lost. And so do we.

Perhaps we know these truths about God but we don't have a personal experience of them. I am not saying that experience is the foundation of our faith but I am saying that God wants these truths to be a heart-felt reality. He wants us to personally know his embrace.

Henri Nouwen wrote a great book on this parable called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Before he wrote the book he was able to visit the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and spend several hours sitting and gazing at Rembrandt's painting depicting the prodigal's homecoming scene. Rembrandt painted a scene with the prodigal kneeling before the father and several people looking on. Nouwen makes the point that it isn't enough to stand and watch others receive the lavish grace of God. Instead each of us at some point are invited to be in the center, allowing the father to lay his hands on us.

God wants each of us to have the kind of relationship with him that he had with his own son. And so he searches, finds, and brings us home like the good shepherd. Home is in the center of our being where we hear the father say, "You are my beloved daughter, you are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased." Our core identity is the beloved of God. This is our address. This is our home.

The second question to reflect on is whether or not you want to be a person with the character and heart of the father. Once we know ourselves as a son or daughter, God wants us to grow into his likeness as a father.

Henri Nouwen writes:

Do I want to be like the Father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also, the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?³

A person who is like the father is willing to suffer injustice, ridicule, public humiliation, financial loss, and rejection. This person initiates grace and never stops, is willing to wait and endure the pain of heartache and loneliness, is willing to feel tenderness and compassion towards rebellious and unclean people, is able to receive sinners and even enemies. This is what we are called to do as God's people.

Perhaps the hardest place to be a father or mother is with your own family—parents, siblings, spouse, and especially children. It might be easier to be gracious and kind with people we are more detached from but there is just so much emotion connected to family.

What kind of spouse do you want to be? Are you willing to be kind, gracious, and forgiving? Eugene Peterson says that the most important thing for marriage is forgiveness. The truth is that you will probably hurt your spouse and be hurt. Being like the father means to continue to initiate grace towards the other.

What kind of friend do you want to be? Friends will hurt and disappoint us. Being like the father means that instead of being resentful and critical we will continue to believe the best and offer love whether it is accepted or not.

What kind of parent do you want to be? It is important to realize that you cannot save your children from pain even though you will try. We cannot control the outcome of our children's lives. Some of our children might rebel and wander off to a far country. Being like the father means we gradually give our children freedom to make their own choices even if we don't approve. It means we don't judge children by their behavior, hold onto resentments and hurts, withhold love until they meet our expectations, or get upset over money that is wasted foolishly. Will you be a parent that will lavish love and feel compassion toward prodigal children?

I believe that the father had already planned what he would do well in advance of seeing his son. And whether we are a physical or spiritual parent I think it is important for us to do the same thing. It is really hard to show grace and welcome home sinners spontaneously unless that is our mindset all along.

Dr. David Frost wrote a prayer offering praise to God our Father that sums up in very few words much of what we have talked about this morning.

Father of all,
we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son
and brought us home.⁴

Now may we “have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:18–19)

1. Kenneth Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 110.

2. *ibid*, 129.

3. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 122

4. *ibid*, 161