

Proposition: As we listen to Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32, we will learn that the Lord loves two types of lost people.

- I. The Lord loves "down-and-outers" (11-24).
 - A. We see the sin of the younger son (11-19).
 1. He disgraced his father (11-12).
 2. He indulged himself (13-16).
 3. He decided to go back (17-19).
 - B. We see the love of the father (20-24).
 1. He showed compassion.
 2. He extended sonship.
 - C. We see the restoration of the younger son (24b).
 - II. The Lord loves "up-and-outers" (25-32).
 - A. We see the sin of the older son (25-30).
 1. He disgraced his father.
 2. He defended himself.
 3. He condemned his brother.
 - B. We see the love of the father (31-32).
 1. He showed compassion.
 2. He extended sonship.
 - C. We don't see the restoration of the older son.
- Implications: What's the point of the story?
1. We must confess our unworthiness.
 2. We must cherish God's love.

This morning we're going to begin a mini-series entitled, "Parables That Touch the Heart." Jesus was a Master Teacher, and one of the great vehicles He used to impart truth was story-telling. Over and over Jesus spoke in parables, not to entertain, but to transform.

Back in 1989, we engaged in a full-length series on the parables of Jesus. In our present series, we want to reexamine three of Jesus' most pointed stories, each having to do with heart issues, namely forgiveness. Our aim is to invite the Good Physician (to change metaphors) to use His divine scalpel to peel away the calluses from our hearts.

Today, we begin with what some have called the greatest short story in the world. It's commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, although I would suggest it would be more accurately tabbed "The Parable of the Prodigal *Sons*," for reasons we'll soon see. There's no question this is one of the most familiar passages in the Bible--perhaps too familiar, so that consequently, we've often missed the point of it.

It's a story that teaches us about God and about ourselves. It has to do with what God thinks of lost people. At the outset, allow me to tell you where we're going. As we listen to this parable, we will learn that the Lord loves two types of lost people.

I. The Lord loves "down-and-outers" (11-24).

This parable is actually the third of three in Luke 15, each having to do with lost things: a lost sheep (1-7), a lost coin (8-10), and a lost son (11-32). What prompted Jesus to tell these stories? We find out in verses 1-2, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable..."

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Isn't it interesting that many "down-and-outers" gravitated towards Jesus? Why was that? It wasn't because He condoned their sin, but rather because He offered them a way out of their sin. He gave them hope and unconditional love in spite of their sin.

And the Pharisees muttered. "What are you doing spending so much time with sinners, Jesus? And you call yourself a man of God!" To which Jesus told these stories, the most poignant of which begins in verse 11, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them."

When Jesus told this parable, He revealed what God thinks of sinners. To God, there are two types of lost people, the first is the down-and-outer, as represented by the younger son.

A. We see the sin of the younger son (11-19). What was the sin of the younger son? His lostness surfaces in three ways in the story.

1. *He disgraced his father (11-12).* "And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me (KJV)." Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, that may be a little out of line, but these days fathers and sons have spats all the time. So a son left home--that's a shame, but it's not the end of the world, is it? After all, the son was entitled to his inheritance, wasn't he?"

I'm indebted to an insightful book by Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, which sheds much light on the middle eastern culture that surrounds this story. Bailey himself lived in the Middle East, and for fifteen years traveled throughout the area asking peasants for their reaction to Jesus' stories. Jesus was not a Westerner. He lived in a Semitic culture. So to discover the response Jesus would have received when He first told the story, Bailey asked present day, Semitic listeners what they thought. In village after village, from Morocco to India and from Turkey to Sudan, Bailey asked if any son in their village had ever made such a demand of a father.

Here's what he discovered. For a son to ask for his inheritance while his father is still living is paramount to wishing for his father's death! In fact, in Jesus' story, the prodigal's request is twofold. First, he asked his father to divide the inheritance. His request was granted. But that only gave him ownership; it did not give him authorization to sell the inheritance. Until what happened? Until his father died.

Do you see the implication of the younger son's request? In essence he's saying, "Hey Dad, I can't wait for you to die. I want my inheritance *now*. It's more important to me than you are."

Appalling? Yes, but if you want to see something even more staggering, look at what the father did in verse 12, "So he divided his property between them." We would expect the father to explode at his rebel son. Yet he didn't. In fact, not only here but throughout the story, the father demonstrated an extravagant love that is beyond our comprehension.

Something else is notable by its absence. The text says that the father divided his property between *them*. Question--what was the older son doing while this was happening? Answer--he remained silent. We would expect this firstborn to put his foot down, and say, "I will not accept my inheritance! It's not right!" What's more, we would expect the older brother to assume the role of mediator between the father and the kid-brother. His silence seems to indicate he didn't want to get involved, and that he was glad to see his brother go. Granted, an argument from silence is a weak argument, but the silence will break shortly. The lostness of the second son surfaced in a second way.

2. *He indulged himself (13-16).* "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living (13)." The younger son indulged himself. He violated at least four of the ten commandments, if not

more--he dishonored his father, he coveted, he apparently engaged in immoral, wild living, and he placed the idol of indulgent living before his allegiance to the Lord.

He was free at last! Free to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, free to call his own shots. Or was he free? The truth is, he was a slave to his own indulgences, like so many today are. And he learned the hard way the truth of God's Word, "Be sure your sins will find you out."

God took action to do what the father could not do. He sent a famine, led the prodigal to a pig farmer, and let him hit bottom. Verses 14-16, "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

By the way, is sin fun? Sure it is, or we'd never yield to temptation. Parents, we need to be honest with our children--sin is fun...for awhile. So is skydiving without a chute, but I wouldn't recommend it. The cost of sin is too great! That's what the prodigal learned.

3. *He decided to go back (17-19).* He was desperate. The short-lived thrills of sin were long gone. So were his money, his food, and his hope. He was dying of starvation. And then what happened?

Verse 17, "When he came to his senses." Stop there. For the first time in a long while, this young man faced the facts of reality. He took a long hard look at himself, and here's what he saw (17b-20a), "He said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven [i.e. "God"] and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father."

The wild life didn't turn out to be all that it was cracked up to be. In fact, the son was sick and tired of it. So he decided to go back home. He'd hit bottom. Or had he?

Why did the son decide to go home? What was his motive? Many feel he genuinely repented in verse 17. I don't think so. The genuine repentance came later. We're told he went home not because he had remorse for his sins against his father, but because he was hungry! We get the sense that his real motivation for going home wasn't to be reconciled to his father, but to make things better for himself.

Do you know people who view salvation like that? A man comes for counsel. He's lost his family and his job because of alcohol. He says he wants to "get right with God." Does he really? Or does he merely want to use God to make things better for himself?

How about the person who says, "I don't want to go to hell so I guess I'll get saved."? Is that genuine repentance? It's hard to tell, but one thing's for sure. True repentance involves a desire to be restored to the Father, not merely to avoid hell.

Well, that was the younger son's plan, to go home and plead for the opportunity to become his father's hired servant. A humble aspiration? Maybe, maybe not. The word for "hired men" (19) refers to an outsider. He didn't belong to the family. He was employed by the owner. He made wages. And don't miss this--he was a *free* man.

Was it possible that the younger son devised a plan whereby he could protect his freedom, continue to live independently in the local village, earn a living so he could try to repay the inheritance he had squandered, and protect his pride? You'll notice in the son's plan in verse 19, he intends to *command* his father to "make me like one of your hired men." It seems that he didn't want grace as a son. He wanted to save face himself.

Is that the way you view salvation? Many people do. They don't see themselves as utterly depraved, but naively think they can patch things up in their relationship with God. They view repentance as a work that we can do to earn God's favor.

Don't miss an important detail. Look at the difference between the speech the son intended to say to his father (18-19) and the words he actually said (21). What's different? Verse 21, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." What's missing? When the son finally meets his father, he doesn't say, "Make me as one of your hired servants."

Why not? Some say it's because the father interrupted him, that he intended to but couldn't. I don't think so. I think that the omission indicates that the prodigal son had changed, truly changed. He had intended on being a hired servant, to earn his way, to preserve his independence and pride. But he repented. He humbled himself before his father, and was willing to place himself under his father's authority, not as a hired worker, but as a *son*.

Wow! What was it that changed the younger son? It's what he saw when he got home.

B. We see the love of the father (20-24). Verse 20, "But while he [the younger son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, and threw his arms around him and kissed him." I'm amazed at the unconditional love demonstrated by this father. Notice what he did.

1. *He showed compassion.* The text says "while he was a long way off" the father saw him coming. That indicates he was waiting for his son to return. There's no trace of the attitude, "The boy disgraced me. Let him suffer awhile. Maybe then he'll appreciate his old man. I deserve respect, and I'll wait right here until he gives it to me." Rather, with his heart full of compassion, he ran down the dusty road, grabbed his son's neck, and kissed him again and again.

Bailey says in that culture it's unthinkable for an oriental man to run in public with a long, flowing robe on. I remember watching modern, Orthodox priests in Jerusalem wearing their long robes, walking at a slow, dignified pace. May I suggest to you that one reason this father humiliated himself by running in public to meet his son was to demonstrate to the village people that he had forgiven the son that had disgraced him. That wasn't all his love moved him to do.

2. *He extended sonship (22-24).* "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Ponder a question. Do you think the father felt like showing compassion to his wayward son? We all know fathers and sons who keep their cool distances over far lesser conflicts than this one. We hear a lot about "tough love" which says, "Draw the line. Make the person respect you." That's not what the father did. He didn't draw the line. He removed the line. He made himself vulnerable. That's biblical love.

Having seen the sin of the younger son, and the love of the father, thirdly...

C. We see the restoration of the younger son (24b). The key word of Luke 15 is mentioned again in verse 24--the son that was "lost" is found! Verse 24 concludes, "So they began to celebrate."

The point of the story is obvious, isn't it? The father represents God. And the younger son represents one type of lost people that the Lord loves to restore to Himself--down-and-outers. Like the tax collectors in verse 1. Isn't it amazing to ponder the love of God? It's absolutely mind-boggling to watch the love of God melt the hard heart of a person who is down-and-out. My friend, God loves you, no matter how down-and-out you are! That's why He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to the cross. Behold the love of God!

The Prodigal Son--it's a great story, isn't it? But it's not over. In fact, we're not even at the climax yet. May I suggest to you that the main character in the story isn't the younger son,

nor the father. It's the elder brother. Indeed, he represents a second type of lost person that needs Christ.

II. The Lord loves "up-and-outers" (25-32).

When Jesus told the story, He masterfully contrasted the behavior of the two sons. We've seen the sin of the younger son, now...

A. We see the sin of the older son (25-30). Verses 25-27, "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'"

At first, we may admire the older son. He's not a "problem" child. He's out in the field, working, doing his job. He's no disgrace to his father. He's no "sinner" like his kid-brother. Or is he? As we'll soon see, he is. No, he's not a down-and-outer, but an up-and-outer. A moralist. That's the hardest person to reach with the gospel. He's a decent fellow, but his righteousness is only skin-deep. Inside is a corrupt heart full of greed, anger, jealousy, and self-righteousness. And those sins, my friend, are just as heinous in God's sight as the more obvious sins of the younger brother.

If you look carefully, you'll see the older son committing three sins in the story.

1. *He disgraced his father.* How? Verse 28, "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him." We may think, "Well big deal. So he's upset because he thinks his dad was too soft with his brother. Better to stay outside and cool off rather than make a scene, right?"

Wrong. In that culture, custom demands that the older son go inside. Even if he's upset with his brother, it's his duty as firstborn to honor his father by joining the celebration. Remember, the whole community is there celebrating. The older son is expected to attend his father's party, out of respect for the father. The younger son disgraced the father with overt rebellion, the older son did it with covert rebellion.

2. *He defended himself.* Instead of saving his complaint until after the guests were gone, the elder son chose to humiliate his father publicly by making him come outside and quarrel while the guests were present.

The father pleaded with the older son, but to know avail (28). Listen to the son's haughty, self-defense in verses 29-30, "But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"

The father's love for the prodigal pulled the cork on the older son's heart, and out came the most vile, ugly sins. Do you hear the egotism in the older son's voice? He insults his father and defends himself in four ways. One, he used no title of respect. Two, he accused his father of favoritism, yet had forgotten all the unmerited things his father had done for him. Three, he disgraced his father publicly, yet had the nerve to say, "I've never disobeyed you." And four, he likened his father to a cruel taskmaster when he said, "All these years I've been slaving for you."

There are a lot of church members that are just like that. They've reduced the Christian life to cold, sterile duty. They ignore the celebration that could be theirs because of their self-righteous blindness.

3. *He condemned his brother.* He calls his young brother "this son of yours" (30). He didn't even claim his brother, let alone want to be with him. By the way, notice how his bitterness towards his brother cut off his fellowship with his father. That's what bitterness does to a Christian, too. It short-circuits our fellowship with our Father.

The story of the Prodigal Son is even more tragic than we once thought. The father has *two* lost sons, not one. One is an honest sinner, the other a hypocritical sinner. How did the father respond to the sinfulness of his older son? The same way he did the younger.

B. We see the love of the father (31-32). "My son, the father said, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The father extended the same love to his older son as to his younger.

1. *He showed compassion.* He overlooked his sons insults and arrogance.

2. *He extended sonship.* The younger son wanted to be a servant. The older son acted like a servant. But the father wanted *sons*, not servants.

Abe Lincoln was once asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they were finally defeated and returned to the Union. The questioner expected Lincoln to respond with a word of vengeance, but he didn't. Lincoln answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." My friend, it is the wonder of the love of God that He treats us like that.

Now the climactic question--Did the older son respond to the father's love? The answer is...Jesus doesn't tell us! Indeed...

C. We don't see the restoration of the older son. Why did Jesus leave out the end of the story? You'll find the answer by looking at verse 2--who was listening to the story as Jesus told it? The Pharisees were. The Pharisees were just like the older son, and the truth is, Jesus wanted *them* to finish the story.

Implications: What's the point of the story?

It's this. Jesus Christ came to save sinners, that includes down-and-outers, and up-and-outers. The lost need grace, and that includes us, *all* of us. How are you going to respond to the undeserved grace and love of God? The story calls us to do two things.

1. *We must confess our unworthiness.* Have you come to grips with your *lostness*, your absolute inability to please God, and your utter dependence upon His grace? It's so easy to see self-righteousness in others, but so hard to detect it in ourselves. Confess to God your unworthiness.

You may be a down-and-outer--but you're not too far gone for the love of God! You may be an up-and-outer--you need the love of God more than you realize. All of us are unworthy. We must confess that to God. We must do something else...

2. *We must cherish God's love.* How do we cherish the love of God? By looking to the Cross. By accepting what God provided for us at the Cross. By sharing what happened on the Cross with others.

Response:

Hymn of Response #326 "Softly and Tenderly"

Time for Response in Prayer