

Date: November 6, 2022

Series: "Truth to Build Your Life On"

Title: *The Three-fer Parable*

Text: Luke 15

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I think you're all familiar with the concept of a "two-fer." But just in case you're not---here's an example. You go to the car dealer to buy a car and he says things like, "If you get this model, we'll throw in seat warmers for free."

Or---"If you get the extended warranty, we will throw in a lifetime of free oil changes." Which really means, "These 'free oil changes' will be opportunities for us to tell you about maintenance you don't really need---for which we will charge four times what a normal mechanic would."

Those are examples of a "two-fer."

I mention that because in this morning's parable---Jesus gives not a two-fer but a THREE-fer. He gives us not one---not two---but THREE stories all in one sitting---no extra "charge." And the "three-fer" reference accurate because Jesus refers to these stories not as THESE parables but as THIS parable. Take your Bibles and turn to Luke 15 and you'll see what I mean.

As is our custom I ask that, if able, you stand in respect for God's Word as it's read.

Luke 15:1-32

1 - Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.

2 - But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This Man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 - Then Jesus told them THIS parable:

4 - "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

5 - And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders

6 - and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

7 - I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

8 - "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"

9 - And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'

10 - In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

11 - Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.

12 - The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them.

13 - "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.

14 - After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

15 - So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

16 - He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 - "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

18 - I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you.

19 - I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

20 - So he got up and went to his father. "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.

- 21 - *“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*
- 22 - *“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.*
- 23 - *Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.*
- 24 - *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.*
- 25 - *“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.*
- 26 - *So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.*
- 27 - *‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’*
- 28 - *“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him.*
- 29 - *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.*
- 30 - *But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*
- 31 - *‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.*
- 32 - *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.’”*

Now let’s back up a bit and get some context. Remember---even before Jesus was born there was a polarization in Israel between religious folks and the people who weren’t religious. And---as I said last week, when He began His ministry our Lord very quickly became known for His compassion for these irreligious people---those individuals that the religious people thought of as the BAD guys.

Well, these “bad guys and gals” loved Jesus. They were attracted to Him like ants to a picnic---like moths to a flame---like parents to their kids’ Halloween candy. And Jesus obviously enjoyed this group of “outsiders.” He loved their eagerness to feast on His messages which is why He went to their parties and ate in their homes. In fact, according to the “religious” people of the time, Jesus spent far too much time with these individuals whom they labeled as the worst kind of people.

In verses 1 and 2 of this chapter it says that when the Pharisees saw Jesus in the center of a crowd of tax collectors and other obviously sinful, irreligious people---they muttered critically, ***“This Man welcomes sinners and eats with them!”*** In response to this criticism Jesus told not one not two but three stories to address this issue---and I think they are best understood as ONE parable---a THRE-FER---three parables in ONE---three shots to address the same issue.

So, *“What was Jesus trying to teach these ‘religious people’---and us---with this SUPER-PARABLE---this three-fer?* First, He was pointing to the sad, sinful fact that:

1.) SINNERS don’t look GOOD to SELF-RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE.

As we just read---the religious authorities looked at tax collectors and harlots and thieves with a sense of revulsion. They excluded themselves from them---and referred to these people as people to be avoided---as THE “sinners” --- inferring that they were NOT “sinners”---THOSE people but not US. No---we are righteous. I mean these religious leaders wouldn’t have taken offense if we called them “self-righteous” for in their minds that’s exactly what they were---they had made themselves righteous by obeying the law.

And this attitude of these Jewish religious leaders---these “under-shepherds”---had been prophesied long ago. Listen to the words of Ezekiel:

“The Word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says; “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock!? You [shepherds] have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. I am against the shepherds and will hold them

accountable. I will rescue the flock from their mouths. I Myself will search for My sheep and look for them. I will rescue them.” (Ezekiel 34:1ff)

Way back in Ezekiel’s day God was talking about the sin of the pharisees and other religious rulers---those “righteous shepherds” who looked at LOST SHEEP---with disdain.

The elder brother in the third story felt the same way about his prodigal sibling. Remember? His sinful little brother didn’t LOOK good to him. When his father came out to encourage him to come in and join the party---the celebration of the prodigal’s return---the elder brother referred to his sibling as, ***“that son of yours.”*** He couldn’t even bring himself to say, ***“my brother.”*** He refused to embrace his repentant brother and obviously had not missed him or worried about him.

Plus, in his disrespect for his loving, compassionate father, he in essence broke the two most important commandments. He failed to love his father (who in this story represents God)---and his brother.

And sadly---this self-righteous attitude has not died out. Too many of us are often like these “religious” leaders---and this elder brother. We claim to love God---but we don’t love certain sinners. People who have obviously messed up in life---well, they DON’T look so GOOD in our “humble opinion.”

Ed Rowell tells of what he refers to as the saddest day in his pastorate. One year he had led his church to focus on personal evangelism---and God had blessed that effort. Dozens of people from the community had come to faith in Jesus and were beginning to participate in the life of the church. But the old members were not comfortable with this. All these new-converts were making it hard to find a parking place---and they were sitting in places there the “old” members had sat for years. In their minds the pastoral staff was giving more attention to these new believers than they did to the “oldies” whose tithes paid all the bills.

It all came to a head at a business meeting where one of the “old,” long-time members stood to his feet and angrily referring to the new Christians said, *“I am sick and tired of these blankety-blank people coming in here and messing up the way we do church!”* Like this sinful church member, too many times---too many Christians don’t like the look of certain people.

I confess that from time to time I have had a bit of self-righteousness in my own attitudes. I’m ashamed to admit it---but it’s true. Let me explain. For the past few years Sue has spent SO much time keeping the food pantry running. I mean, we are ALWAYS stopping by to check on it---and if it’s empty running to the Dollar and a Quarter Tree to buy food to refill it. It’s not an excuse but I’m so busy---and often exhausted which led me to mouth self-righteous comments like: *“Sue I think some people may be taking advantage of us. They could work, but it’s easier to get free food here.”* And she would rightly say, *“You can’t judge like that---you can’t LOOK at them like that. We don’t know their back story. We have to remember these are first and foremost PEOPLE Whom God loves.”* Well, I “grumbled” a bit but reluctantly agreed.

Not too many days later we had gone to the COSTCO to get food to restock the pantry and had stopped by the church to fill the shelves. When we arrived, there was a grandmother filling her backpack with rice and beans. I talked to her and learned she lives in Laytonia with her husband and four sons. Thanks to the pandemic her husband’s hours had been cut way back---and she had lost her job as a housekeeper at a hotel in Gaithersburg. They NEEDED help.

It was a bitterly cold winter day, and she was trying to get as much food as possible in her backpack before she walked back to their home in Laytonia. My heart broke---I felt ashamed---and could clearly hear God saying, *“This is a PERSON Mark---and I love her just as much as I love you.”* This poor woman wanted to work---but couldn’t and was trying to feed her family---a family that was struggling through no fault of their own. So, we filled not just her backpack---but the back of my car with food---and we insisted on driving her home and helping her carry the food in.

Even today, Sue is always telling stories like that about people she meets at the pantry or at Grace-in-Store---hurting, needy, lonely people who need HELP---sinners like you and me who need to SEE the love of God. Too many of us are too

like I did in my grumbling---too many of us are too like the elder brother and these religious hypocrites. We look at needy, hurting people and don't like what we see---so we judge.

Joseph Stowell writes, “[Christians] are perceived to be long on madness and short on mercy, to be more committed to our consternation than we are to compassion.”

One thing this parable should teach us is that Christ has called us not to avoid---but to love and minister to all people---not just those with physical needs---but the obviously sinful people of the world---people who are living miserable lives because of their own choices. Remember, Jesus said, **“I have come to seek and to save that which was lost.”** (Luke 19:10) And before He ascended to heaven, He said to all Christians, **“As the Father sent me, so send I you.”** (John 20:21) So, we are COMMANDED to go to needy people, people with hearts hungry for God's love. That's how we should LOOK at them.

You know here in America we call tow trucks, “wreckers.” But in England these kinds of trucks all have one big word stenciled on them: “RECOVERY” ---same vehicle, same mission---but a totally different perspective. We say, “There goes a wrecker.” and the English say, “I say, old chap, here comes recovery.” THAT'S why Jesus was in the midst of sinners and this is why He calls us to be in their midst as well. We are on a God-given mission of RECOVERY.

And that leads to another truth Jesus was teaching that day.

2.) In God's eyes ALL SINNERS---look far BETTER than they---WE think.

God doesn't look at sinners from the perspective of self-righteous people. No---Even the WORST sinner is precious in His sight. Our perspective must be like God's---we must look at sinners---irreligious people---not with criticism but compassion---not as the enemy but as the wounded.

Our Heavenly Father REJOICES when sinners come home---HE celebrates when the lost are found. We see that message in all three stories.

Remember the story of the shepherd who lost one sheep? How did Jesus say he responded when the sheep was found? Look at verses 5 and 6 again. **“When he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’**

What about the woman and the lost coin? Look at verse 9: **“When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’”**

What about the lost son? Look at Jesus' words in verses 22-24: **“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.’ So, they began to celebrate.”**

Twice in this “three-fer” Jesus uses a form of this phrase: **“There will be more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons ‘who do not need to repent.’” (vs 7, 10)** And I think I read it correctly. Jesus looked at His self-righteous listeners and with the first century version of air quotes he said, **“persons ‘who do not need to repent.’”** For as Paul said in Romans 3, **“ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”**

There is no such thing as a human being who is SELF-righteous---righteous on their own merit. As verse 10 says, **“There is NO ONE who is righteous---no, not even ONE.”**

All of Heaven rejoices when a sinner repents. To God there is no such thing as a “bad guy.” He loves ALL people---and rejoices when anyone repents and comes home to Him. I love our St. Bernard of Clairvaux puts it. He says, **“The tears of the repentant form the wine of the angels!”** The angels drink the wine of the tears of the repentant and rejoice.

Let's stop for a little self-examination.

- What's your response to the prodigal brother who is being destroyed by his homosexuality? Compassion---or is it disgust, condemnation, name-calling?
- What about the prodigal sister who finds herself trapped in an unwanted pregnancy and saw no alternative but abortion. What's your response: name calling, condemnation, rejection?
- What about the welfare mom with three kids, no husband, and no job skills? What's your response? Is it to think of her as lazy, a "leech" on society?
- What about the homeless? Do you think, *"Lazy bums. Get a job for cryin' out loud!"* Did you know that a large percentage of homeless people can't work because they are mentally ill?

Well, if one of those lost souls should happen to find his or her way into this church as they seek to find the Father—what would be our reaction? I pray none of us would act like these pharisees. When the "pharisees" of our world see these people, they don't like their language. They don't like their smell. They don't like their values. They criticize their sinful past and refuse to accept them as family.

Sometimes I'm ashamed that so many of us who claim to follow Jesus fail to have his compassion for the lost and broken. A heart like the Father's is one that is willing to be inconvenienced so that others might be brought back to God. A heart like the Father's feels sorrow when it sees someone crippled and broken by sin—not disgust. And that leads to a third point I think Jesus was making with His "three-fer."

3.) God LOOKS for SINNERS. He LOOKS for the LOST.

A heart like the Father's will go looking for the lost and will do whatever it takes to help them find out about His amazing grace and unconditional love. Remember what the shepherd did? In verse 4, Jesus said that he, *"...left the ninety-nine in the open country and went after the lost sheep until he found it."*

What about the woman with that lost coin? Jesus said she lit a lamp and swept the straw off her dirt floor and SEARCHED until she found it.

And what about the lost son? Jesus said the father did what NO father would have done in that culture. In verse 20 He said, *"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."*

The idea here is this "looking down the road" deal is something this dad did every day. He was ALWAYS looking for his son to return. And when He saw him after so many months of looking---he RAN TO him---he didn't care that culture considered it disgraceful for a man of his stature to RUN.

Why did he run? Because he loved his son. And this would have shocked the pharisees. The great Jewish New Testament scholar, C. G. Montefiore said these parables were revolutionary-----because while the rabbis agreed that God would welcome a repentant sinner, the idea that God SEEKS sinners was a new insight.

Think of it this way.

What if you were Christmas shopping at Tysons and you looked around and your three-year-old was nowhere to be found? What would you do? Well, of course you would begin a frantic search from one end of that massive mall to the next!

What if she had a runny nose? Would you still search?

What if she had been throwing a tantrum in the store---embarrassing you in front of other shoppers? Would you still search? OF COURSE, YOU WOULD! Because in spite of our children's flaws and out and out sins, we LOVE them. Well, that parental love is NOTHING in comparison to how God feels about you and me. Like the prodigal's father, God loves us IN SPITE of our sin.

He doesn't want ANY to perish!" The fact is our HEAVENLY FATHER loves it when sinners come home. If Heaven has a front porch—God is on it WATCHING and WAITING for each of His children to return. So, when we do, it's just like it was for the younger brother. When we repent, God **"restores the joy of our salvation."** (Psalm 51:12). He **"redeems us so that we can receive the full rights of sons."** (Galatians 4:5)

Don't get me wrong. God is Holy. He is a consuming fire. But when we turn to Him, He is a God Who comes running—running to lavish His love on us. And—the glorious news of the Gospel is that no one is beyond His love. You cannot do anything that will keep Him from kissing you and bestowing upon you the robe, the ring, and the sandals. I mean UTTER forgiveness is the only kind of forgiveness that God gives.

Yancey writes, *"God is like a love-sick father Who cares more about us than our sin. He longs to welcome us home and restore us."*

Look back at the first story? What did the shepherd do when he found his lost sheep? He joyfully picked it up and put it on his shoulders. Of course, like the woman searching for her lost coin and the father of the prodigal searching for his son, this shepherd is a picture of our Lord.

Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther's righthand man, said, *"Interwoven in the text there is a sweet signification of the passion of Christ: He places upon His shoulders the sheep He has found. That is, He transfers to Himself the burden of us."* As 1st Peter 2 24-5 puts it, **"Jesus Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness---by His wounds you have been healed, For, you were like sheep going astray but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"** God seeks for us---He wants us to repent and come home. As Paul puts it in Galatians 4: He **"redeems us so that we can receive the full rights of sons."**

You may remember that during the imprisonment of fifty-two American hostages in Iran---it became popular to wear or display yellow ribbons as expressions of our joy in welcoming the released hostages back home. The use of the yellow ribbon grew out of the following true story. A group of college students were en-route from New York to Florida for a weekend. As their bus passed through New Jersey a man dressed in a plain, ill-fitting suit sat down in front of them. He never moved his dusky face or said much. He just chewed the inside of his lip a lot, frozen into a personal cocoon of silence. As they traveled together the young people introduced themselves to him and began to learn his story. He had been in a New York jail for the past four years, and now he was going home. For the past three and one-half years he had had no contact with his wife or children. At the beginning of his imprisonment, he had written to his wife, telling her only that he was going to be away for a long time---and that if she couldn't stand it, she could merely forget him and marry someone else. He would understand. Now, for all he knew she might have done that. One of the young people replied, *"And are you going home now not knowing?"*

"That's right," he said. Then he told them that the week before, when he was sure that his parole was coming through, he wrote to his wife again. There was a big oak tree on their place near the highway, and he wrote her that if she'd take him back, she should put a yellow handkerchief on the tree. Then he would get off and come home. If she didn't want him, she should forget it---put no handkerchief on the tree, and he'd pass on through. By this time the bus was twenty miles from his home, and all six of the young people were caught up in anticipation. They took over the window seats on the right side of the bus, waiting for the view of that oak tree. The bus acquired a dark, hushed mood, full of the silence of absence and lost years. The man stopped looking, fortifying himself against still another disappointment. The bus drew nearer his home-ten miles and then five. Then, suddenly, all the young people were up out of their seats, screaming, shouting, and crying, doing small dances of exultation. All except the man. He sat there stunned, looking at the oak tree. It was covered with yellow handkerchiefs-twenty of them, thirty of them...maybe hundreds. The tree stood like a banner of welcome blowing in the wind! As the young people shouted, the former con rose from his seat, and sidled to the front of the bus. He was going home again.