

"God's Compassion And Our Mission"

We have some special updates to share at the end of the service this morning, so I want to focus on just one key theme in this passage today: the relationship between God's compassion and our mission. You may know Tommy Clayton. He's the lead pastor of Grace Life Church in Deltona, which we helped plant. I spoke to Tommy's wife, Sarah, on Friday, and she told me how she had recently used the story of the Prodigal Son with a young woman. She said she had never used it the way God allowed her to use it that day. The woman, Pam, a single mother she had met in Deltona, was homeless and had suffered a lot in her life, abuse, rejection... a lot of drama, and trauma. And she was not an innocent in all of it. They helped her get back on her feet. Later she had moved out of state. One day not long ago, Pam reached out to Sarah in a phone call. Some bad things had happened, and she said, *"I can't do this much longer."* Sarah said this woman had some surface understanding of God and the gospel but never seemed to take it all to heart. She didn't feel the reality or embrace the image of a creator God who would love and welcome someone like her. Sarah sharing this story with her made all the difference to her. I loved hearing the story used in that way because it was in the context of Jesus welcoming sinners and living out his mission to seek and to save the lost that he told this story.

Last week we looked mostly at the compassionate father in the Prodigal Son story, but if you remember, in this one chapter, Jesus tells three stories about lost things: 1.) the lost sheep, 2.) the lost coin, and 3.) the lost son or sons. Do you remember why he told these three stories? **Luke 15** begins in **verses 1-2**, saying: *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"* This all takes place within what is sometimes called *The Travel Narrative* in Luke because it is a section of stories unique to **Luke** that contains the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross. It is also called *"The Gospel for the Outcast"* or *"The Outsider"* because many of the stories have that focus. And that is true here in **Luke 15**. The tax

collectors and sinners were outsiders when it came to the community of strong religious conviction. But it was characteristic of Jesus that they were drawn to and received by him. Jesus hears the grumbling and uses the occasion to make the point that **God is a God of great compassion who wants lost people found.**

That was Jesus' mission, and he wants us to share that mission with him. John Calvin wrote about these parables of the lost sheep, and coin and son in **Luke 15** and said what they teach us is this: *"The whole human race belongs to God, and that therefore we ought to gather those who have gone astray, and that we ought to rejoice when they that are lost return ."*(Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XVI see Luke 15)

Jesus said it was this mission he was on that explained so many of his choices. In **Luke 5**, Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow him. Levi hosts a dinner and invites his friends. They are a shady crowd, and the religious people grumble. But Jesus basically says, *"Look, this is part of my job description, hanging out with what you call sinners who are far from God. That's why I am here."* Listen to **Luke 5:32** *"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."* Jesus came for people like you and me who were lost or are lost, and he loves and wants his lost people found. It's the same mission summed up in another story from the same "travel narrative" in Luke. In **Luke 19:10**, when Jesus calls Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree and go home with him, Jesus says, *"the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."* That means not only that he came after you but also that he wants you to seek others with him and for him.

Later Jesus said his mission has also become our mission. In **John 20:21**, Jesus said, *"Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, I am sending you."* So now this is our job description also. There is a place in **2 Corinthians 5:19** where the apostle Paul tells us we are all called to a ministry of reconciliation. He says, *in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

Reconciliation is what we see when lost people are found and embraced by grace and God. Listen to **2 Corinthians 5:20-21**. *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God.*

²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* According to Scripture, there are only two kinds of people. There are some people who have never been reconciled to God. If that is you, then that's the biggest need in your life. If that is not you, if you have been reconciled to God, that is the greatest gift you could be given. But, with that gift of grace comes a mission of reconciliation. Every child of God is an ambassador of Jesus through whom God makes his appeal to the world. Those who have been given grace need to share grace.

This world is full of people who need to know and experience the redeeming love of God.

The woman with whom Sarah shared The Prodigal Son story had no hope she could ever repair the total ruin she had made of her life. She had no hope she could ever be acceptable to or blessed by God. Much of the terrible trauma in her life was due, at least in part, to her own habits, choices, and sins. The father of her three children is abusive. He tells her she's a piece of garbage. She had taken out a restraining order on him. She was living out of her car, trying to make ends meet by delivering door dash in the car, but then she got two flat tires. The children, I believe, had been taken from her. She had a strong sense that you reap what you sow, and you make the bed you lay in. And she had hit bottom. She had no expectation she could recover at all.

Sarah asked if she had ever heard the story Jesus told in **Luke 15**. She said, *"no."* Sarah just began to share this story Pam had never heard. When she began with the part about the boy asking for his inheritance and then going off and losing it all in reckless living, Pam said, *"That's so stupid. That sounds like me."* Understand She had no previous familiarity with the story. She was hearing it for the first time. She couldn't believe this story was in the Bible. The son wasted everything, lost everything, and acted like a jerk (she used more colorful language). She said, in so many words, *he needs to learn his lesson. If I were his dad, I wouldn't want anything to do with him!* She still didn't know why Sarah was even telling her this story. Sarah said this is a story Jesus told.

When Sarah got to the part where the father runs to embrace the son, Pam said that is *insane* forgiveness. She couldn't imagine that kind of forgiveness for her. She had done too much. She had gone too far. Sarah told Pam how the dignified older father would have had to hike up his robes and lay pride aside to run to the son like he did.

A big heartache Pam had was that her brother committed suicide, and her mother died a year or so ago. She's often mad at God, but in her mind, as mad as she gets at God, God is infinitely more angry at her. And somehow, all her hardship and loss is punishment for her being such a scumbag. Her abusive boyfriend –the father of her children, not only tells her she's a complete piece of garbage. He tells her she should just kill herself, and he adds...." *Don't ever say you will see them again because you won't. If there is a heaven, none of you are going.*"

When Sarah got to the part about the ring, the sandals, and the robe the father had placed on the son, she explained that these were all pictures of the father conferring on him the utmost dignity, royalty, and honor. Pam said, "*They don't belong on him.*" Sarah said, But the Father was saying, *I am giving it to you, and so it does belong on you because I have set my love on you.*

Remember, she is homeless, living out of her car, which has two flats. She had gone into a restaurant to pick up a door dash order that she was going to try to deliver on foot. She had gone into the restaurant's restroom to clean up and made the call there. So Sarah hears a toilet flush and people talking through this whole discussion. But none of that mattered. Pam had been in an out of multiple church situations for years. Still, she finally seemed to understand the gospel and the offer of a relationship with the compassionate father in that phone call. She said she finally felt that full acceptance was being freely offered her. No matter how badly she had ruined her life, she could come to Christ and to God. She was amazed this was true. This was an actual story in the Bible! These were the words of Jesus! This was a story Jesus told! Pam said, *Sarah, tell me what I need to say to God.*

Two years ago, during *covid*, Sarah had their kids make cards to send to people in their church family, and they included this Pam. Right after Sarah and Pam ended their call, a Facebook notification popped up on Pam's phone. It was a Facebook memory from two years ago, and it was a picture Pam had taken of the card and the Scripture verse. They painted a picture of the sunrise and on the back was **Romans 15:13**, which we often share as a benediction: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.* I wish I could remember the exact words Sarah shared with me on the phone, but it was something about the hollowness and hurt in Pam's heart-lifting. At the end of the week, Pam found a place to live. It just dropped in her lap. It was a two-bedroom house to rent for \$400.00 a month. She said she felt like a human being.

Conclusion

God is a God of great compassion who wants lost people found. That was Jesus' mission, and he wants us to share that mission with him. How do we respond to this? Well, our pastoral and ministry team leaders are talking about that this summer with a view to the year ahead. But here are a few simple things we can all do.

1. We can commit to being a people in this world who reflect the welcome of Jesus and the compassion of the father for lost people. The Bible often speaks to the underlying issue of the heart's posture. What Jesus is showing us is that it is possible to be uncompromising, strong, and God-centered and at the same time attractive, engaging, and compassionate. It begins in our heart and with the humility of knowing we are all in need of grace and compassion from God and that having received it, we are called to share it.

2. Tell stories about God's compassion for lost people. Jesus told stories. Both Sarah and Tommy Clayton told me they used the story of the Prodigal Son with different people in recent weeks, and in both cases, the person to whom they told it had never heard it, and it made an impression. If you have come to faith in Christ, whether you were more like the younger brother or the older brother, share your story.

3. Pray for opportunities to share the truth about God's compassion. In **Luke 10:2**, Jesus said, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."* Pray for Christ-like storytellers who will share the gospel. Pray, as Paul so often prays, that God will give you opportunities to share the gospel and the reality of God's welcoming grace with lost people. Sarah said the morning Pam called, she had prayed for an opportunity to share the gospel and the love and truth of God with someone. The phone call that came later that day was an especially dramatic answer to prayer. Let's make that part of our practice, individually, in our groups, and in our worship

The mission of Jesus was to save lost people. He went all the way to the cross to secure the salvation of his people. He did what we could never do. He satisfied every demand of righteous justice by offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He bore the shame, suffered the penalty, paid the debt for us. We cannot earn our way into the favor of God. We cannot make a single change or do a single thing that would add any merit to what Christ has done. The one thing we must do is to come to God through faith in Jesus, admitting our need for the grace we do not deserve. We turn to Christ and trust in him who died and rose again for us. Be sure you have come to him. Entrust your salvation to him. Receive his grace, rest in it and then live to reflect that grace and share it. That is our mission, to share his compassion.

Amen.

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ.

Almighty God, Thank you for calling wayward people like me to see and receive your saving grace and compassion through faith in Jesus. I confess I know, and you know that I have been sinful and stubborn and unrighteous. I have broken your laws, defied your will, and denied you your rightful place in my life. Thank you for a perfect Savior who lived the life I have not lived for me and suffered the judgment I deserve in my place. I believe Jesus died to pay for my sins and rose

again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Almighty and gracious God, my creator, and redeemer, you are also the perfect and compassionate Father. Enable me by your Holy Spirit to live as your trusting and joyful child. So work by the power of your grace to reproduce in me a Christ like reflection of your own welcoming grace. Let my life mirror your mercy and my words clearly reveal the truth of the gospel. Grant me opportunities to share the message of your grace and compassion with winsome boldness. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen