

This morning, we are in the 24th week of a sermon series that I have entitled “Meeting Jesus.” I have been making my way this year through Luke’s account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, we will be in Luke 15:1-32, looking at an interaction that Jesus had with some religious leaders about God’s heart towards sinners. I will read the passage one section at a time, pausing where necessary to give you some background, before sharing some implications for us today:

Luke 15 - Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In Luke 15, we find Jesus speaking with his typical audience, a mix of religious types – the Pharisees and teachers of the law – and marginal types – “sinners” as the Pharisees call them, people whose lives don’t exhibit faithfulness to God. First of all, I continue to be amazed by how much people outside the mainstream of Judaism were attracted to Jesus. Here he is, again surrounded by all the outsiders in town, and the religious establishment is not happy about this. They mutter, **“this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”** Don’t you half expect Jesus to turn to them and say, **“what is your problem?”**

Why do the Pharisees and the teachers of the law have such an issue with Jesus? Remember the Pharisees’ agenda – like all of the Jews in that day, their biggest concern was the fact that they were living under Roman oppression, and as God’s chosen people, they could not understand why that would be the case. There were four prominent religious groups – the Essenes, Zealots, Sadducees, and Pharisees – in Jesus’ day, and each group had their own beliefs on how to deal with this oppression – withdrawal into the desert, armed rebellion, cooperation, or devotion to God. The Pharisees’ belief was that if the people would be pure enough and faithful to God, then the Messiah would come and deliver them from Roman oppression and restore Israel to its former glory. For this reason, they were like a self-appointed watchdog group, putting pressure on any Jew who was living in ways that were contrary to God: sexually immoral women, tax collectors, and so on. And because of their self-appointed role in the Jewish culture, **they were suspicious of any other religious leaders who attracted a following**, because they wanted to be sure the other leader was on board with their agenda. And since Jesus did not condemn those on the margins but welcomed them, shared meals with them, etc., the Pharisees began to despise him.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees and teachers of the law by telling them two short parables.

Luke 15:3–10 - 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.”

Instead of telling off the Pharisees, he says – he graciously tells them: **when you lose something of value, don’t you drop everything to find it?** And when you find it again, don’t you celebrate? Jesus says that this is why I spend so much time with those on the margins, because they are like a lost sheep, or a lost coin, and they are too valuable to me to just let stay lost. I have to go and find them. And not only do I have to find them, but there will be a party in heaven when I do find them, when they are returned home safe and sound. And then Jesus gets even more personal with his next story, the Parable of the Prodigal Son:

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.”

So there’s a father with two sons, and the younger son goes up to his father one day and asks him for his share of the inheritance. Now, you don’t need to know the 1st century Palestinian context to understand that usually you don’t get your inheritance until someone dies. Clearly, the younger son is telling his father, listen Dad – **you’re as good as dead to me, so why don’t you just give me what I’ve got coming to me now and I’ll go off and live my life, alright?** Let me add a couple other things, however, just to emphasize just how shameful and shocking this would have been to Jesus’ listeners. First of all, even when the father died, the eldest son would have the first claim on the inheritance, so the younger brother is completely out of line, offending not only his father but his brother. Secondly, this is an honor and shame culture, and so for the son to say this to his father is an

incredibly shameful request. Just to ask something like this would be bringing shame on the whole family – the son for being so improper, and the parents for raising a son who would say something like that. Jesus’ audience would have expected not only the parents but the whole town to disown this son for making such a shameful request. But then the father goes and actually grants the request, which would have been shameful as well in his culture. He gives his son his share of the inheritance and lets him go.

So the son goes off to a distant country, where he proceeds to spend all of the inheritance in wild living. Across the lake from where Jesus was teaching was Susita, a Gentile land with theaters, temples, scantily clad women, and none of the Jewish laws or customs, so his audience would have known what he was talking about. Perhaps the young man had heard of Susita and all that went on there and was itching to go. So he liquidates his inheritance and leaves for Susita and spends all he has 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 men 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.’”

So the younger son lives it up until one day his money runs out, and he finds himself in the middle of a famine with no food to eat. The only work he can find is for a pig farmer, feeding the pigs. Of course, to a Jewish audience, **it doesn't get any lower than this** – pigs are unclean animals, and here is this Jewish boy, so hungry that he wishes he could eat the scraps the pigs are eating.

Finally, muddy and smelly and envying the pigs, the son comes to himself, comes to his senses, says “what am I doing?” and reasons that even if he were a hired hand on his father’s farm, he would have food to eat and a place to stay. But he knows that he has shamed his father. So he rehearses the speech and sets out for home.

What would you have expected if you were a Jew in the audience? Finally, we have an opportunity for the father to regain some honor. How will the father treat his son who has rejected him and wished him dead? Will the father reject him in

return? Will he have mercy on him and make him a slave? Imagine their surprise when Jesus tells the rest of the story:

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.”

As the son nears his home, the Father sees him, and runs to meet his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him. The son begins his speech, but the father interrupts him and yells for his servants – bring the best robe and put it on him, put a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a party, for my son is alive again! He is found!

Staggering. **Imagine being a tax collector or a prostitute listening to Jesus.** All your life you've been told by religious people that God is angry with you, that God condemns you and stands in judgment on you, that you need to shape up before he will accept you, and now Jesus is telling you that no - all along God has been waiting on the front porch, looking off into the distance, waiting for you to stop wallowing in the pigsty and come home, that when you come home there will be a welcome beyond anything you could have ever dreamed. That God and all of heaven are waiting to throw a party for you if you would only return to him.

But now imagine being a Pharisee. This father is so shameful. Fathers do not run. They do not pull up their robes and run. And they absolutely do not welcome home disobedient children like this. At best, they would send them to work like a hired hand until they had paid back what they owed. The Pharisees would have been indignant that Jesus was trying to portray God this way.

And that's why the story doesn't end there, because Jesus was telling this story to the Pharisees and religious leaders to make a point. He wants them to understand why he spends so much time with the people on the margins whom the religious people reject. But he also wants them to understand how they fit into this story.

So he tells them about the older brother:

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.’”

Remember that Jesus is telling this parable in response to the grumbling attitude the Pharisees have towards the way Jesus welcomes the sinners in his midst. Therefore, the older brother is a central character in this story. Look at how Jesus even shows empathy towards the Pharisees in this story. You can understand where they're coming from, can't you? They have lived their whole lives trying to be faithful to the Father, and now their younger son, who lived it up, squandering his money with prostitutes comes home, and instead of being punished he gets a party? How is that fair? Why does he get the fattened calf while the older brother hasn't even had a goat? And he refuses to take part in the celebration. Jesus again uses a parable to subversively prove his point – **the Pharisees may think they are faithful people, but they are missing out on the party. It's like they are working for the Father and they don't even know Him. They don't share His heart. They think God is a God of boundaries, not a God of grace.** And the Father ends by telling him that everything he has is also his, but that they had to celebrate because his brother was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.

Let me share a few points that we need to understand from this parable:

1. **Sin is rejecting God as your Lord and Father.**

It is not just breaking God's rules, but breaking His heart. We have each in our own way told the Father that He is as good as dead to us, that we would rather take his gifts and do what we please with them than stay with Him. I don't trust you. I don't believe you have my best interest at heart. I would prefer to be my own master.

Romans 1:18–23 - The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from

what has been made, so that people **are without excuse**.²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Sin is refusing to acknowledge God as Lord and Father, exchanging a relationship with Him for the things of this world.

2. **Sin is fun for a season, until you end up in the pig sty**

Every time we decide to run our own lives, we are telling God that we wish he were dead, and he lets us go. Then one day we wake up and say “what have I become?” Some of you need to hear this and keep this picture in your head, because one day this will be you. Think about **sex and lust outside of the context of marriage** – it can be great and exciting at first, until it destroys your relationships, or the relationships break up and you’ve given yourself to someone you never should have. What about **gossip and ruining someone’s reputation**? They’re great until you realize that no one trust you and you have no close friends anymore. **Anger and bitterness** feel good until you realize you’ve become a negative, bitter person. All **addictions** have their times of excitement, but they also have the times when you wake up and you’re feeding the pigs, saying “what have I become?”

Galatians 6:7–8 - Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.⁸ Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

3. **Trusting in your goodness leaves you just as lost as immoral living**

The older brother may not have rebelled against the father, but in the end he is the one who missed out on the party. At least the prodigal son knew he was lost. The older brother lived with resentment, not realizing the grace that was available to him. The answer is the gospel. Not trusting in your good works, but trusting in Jesus.

Romans 3:20–24 - Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

No one will be declared right before God on the basis of their good works. In fact, this reminds me of another parable that Jesus told:

Luke 18:9–14 - To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Be careful that in your desire to live morally or faithfully that you do not end up like the older brother, trusting in your goodness and looking down on the younger brothers or tax collectors in your midst.

4. Coming to God involves repentance and faith

This is not a story of how we can all just do whatever we please and God will love us as we are. Yes, God is full of love for his rebellious and self-righteous children, but we will not receive His love and mercy until we turn from our sin and self-centeredness to trust in Him. In this story, the younger son came to his senses, came to himself, realizing that things would be better with the father. He turned around and headed back to the Father, and experienced His love and mercy.

Mark 1:14–15 - After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Romans 2:4 - Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:4 tells us that it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance. We realize that God has something better for us than this world has to offer. We repent of our

sin and self-centeredness or of trusting in our own goodness, and we put our faith in Jesus, who died on the cross in our place.

5. **Your motives may be mixed but God is merciful**

The younger son came home because he was hungry and his money ran out. How many people come to faith because of their girlfriend, or because they think God will then answer all of their prayers, or something else selfish? Remember that God forgave a thief on the cross, who certainly was repenting out of fear. Don't wait until your intentions are perfect – just come to God.

6. **God is far more forgiving and full of grace than you would ever expect**

This story is so important. If you believe the Christian faith is about being a good person, then what happens when you fail? I can't go back to church then, right? But this story shows you that God is full of grace, waiting on the porch for you to come home. Jesus describes God as a God who risks shame to run out after those who have broken His heart, and throws a party for them. He is full of grace and forgiveness, ready to forgive.

And this is not just a “no big deal” kind of forgiveness. This is a costly forgiveness. He can welcome us back because Christ died to take the penalty for the sins we deserved:

Romans 5:6–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

2 Corinthians 5:20–21 - We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Come home – there's a party waiting for you. The Father will run out to meet you. You may be covered with mud and manure, but it doesn't matter. Whether it is the first time or the one hundred and first time, come home. The Father will run to you with love and mercy.

At the heart of the gospel is a **God who is the initiator, the lover, the pursuer**. We were lost, and he came after us. That's the way it was in my life – I was not looking for God, but the next thing I knew it was clear that God was inviting me into a real relationship with Him. But like all love stories, it's a two way street. The offer is there, to experience the greatest love you have ever known, a love that can free you from guilt, shame, addiction, fear, to live as the beloved of God. God stands there with His heart in His hand, so to speak, and you have the choice to come home or stay where you are. This morning I encourage you to come home.

And as a church, may we be like the Father and not like the older brother. Churches made up of older brothers are the kind where you walk in and feel like “I do not feel welcome here. I need to get my act together before I come here.” **Churches like the Father are places that surprise you with their grace and welcoming spirit.** As Tim Keller put it in his book “the Prodigal God”:

“Jesus’ teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while offending the Bible-believing, religious people of his day. However, in the main, our churches today do not have this effect. The kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted to contemporary churches, even our most avant-garde ones. We tend to draw conservative buttoned-down, moralistic people. The licentious and liberated or the broken and marginal avoid church. That can only mean one thing. If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did. If our churches aren't appealing to younger brothers, they must be more full of elder brothers than we'd like to think.”

Lord, may we love the way you love, that all might be welcomed home.