

Choosing Contentment

Looking at the “lost chapter” in the Bible. Luke 15. Lost sheep, coin and sons. A parable is simply a story with a deeper (or sometimes hidden) meaning. It is to convey a *concept to be understood* and/or a principle to be put into practice.

Parables required the listeners to be self-critical and put themselves in the appropriate place in the story. Who are the listeners?

Luke 15:1 (NIV) **Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.**

Who were the Tax collectors? Viewed as traitors to their people. Considered worse than people from the pagan nations.

Sinners were whom the religious leaders avoided. Social outcasts. *People who weren't like Jesus, liked Jesus*. This was an ongoing pattern in Jesus' ministry, not a one – time event.

Luke 15:2 (NIV) ² **But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”**

Who are the Pharisees? Religious leaders who studied & obeyed the scripture. Memorized first 5 books of the Bible, word for word.

Who were the teachers of the law? Scribes who were professionally trained to develop, teach and apply the OT law. Added many man-made traditions to what God had said. The traditions eventually became more important than the law itself.

But, Jesus was Intentionally Inclusive in Seeking and Loving the Lost. He valued relationships over rituals & religion.

Jewish culture in Biblical days was a shame/honor driven society. To lose a sheep as a shepherd would be a shameful thing. Coin from bridal necklace – shame. A son who leaves the family and community was the worst shame of all in Jewish culture.

What I believe we are going to see is that *both sons were lost*. Both sons needed healing and forgiveness. Both sons in this story needed the love and embrace of a forgiving father.

You Can Become Lost While Never Leaving Home

On the surface of this parable it's easy to think that this is a story that separates the two brothers into the good one and the evil one. But the truth is that in this story *only the father is good*.

Luke 15:25 - 26 (NIV) **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.**

In Jewish culture the Elder brother would be expected to help reconcile the father and the younger brother. The elder brother should have gone out looking for the younger brother and brought him home. That is a tip off to the issues of the older brother.

Luke 15:27 (NIV) **'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'**

You can hear the joy of the servant as he shares the “good news” w/the older brother.

Put yourself in the older brother's sandals for a moment. Your younger brother told your dad in essence “I wish you were already dead”. Sold his share of the estate, took his money and ran off to party it up in a land, far, far away. He shamed your father and your family. What are you feeling? What are you thinking? How do you respond?

Luke 15:28a (NIV) **The older brother became angry and refused to go in.**

He became angry. Why? B/c he doesn't think that things are working out the way he believes they should (come back to this). This doesn't measure up in his mind. He shames his father publicly by not going in, *but watch how the father responds:*

Luke 15:28 (NIV) **The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.**

Pause for just moment and let the goodness of the father sink in. The father loves both sons. He runs out to meet both his boys. He desires them to share in the joy of this moment and celebrate with him. The heart of the Father is a heart of (overwhelming, limitless) mercy.

The younger son accepted the embrace of the father; he welcomed the mercy that his father showed him. What is the response of the older son to the father? Let's find out.

Luke 15:29 (NIV) **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.'**

“**Look**”! Failure to greet his father respectfully with a title (“Father” or “Sir”) was offensive. “**Slaving**”. His obedience to his father had become a burden and a duty. There is no joy, no love, no reward in seeing his father smile, or nod his approval b/c he's pleased as the older son obediently worked.

Instead he insinuated that serving his father was as serving a slave master. A slave works out of fear of consequences, not love or joy.

If you have kids you've heard the phrase: "It's not fair!" You never let me stay out until then. It's not fair you let her go to that event." He quickly compares his situation, the choices he has made and his brothers' situation & choices which lead to complaining about it not being fair and not getting what he, the older brother, thinks he deserves.

The reason the older son is angry is b/c he thought that by obeying all the rules, he would get what he wanted. Instead of being obedient out of love for his father, he followed the rules & didn't rock the boat for his own selfish benefit.

That's not fair! **I SERVED YOU!** I stayed home. I didn't waste your hard-earned \$\$\$. You owe me. He was angry b/c he wasn't getting what he felt he was owed.

You and I can become lost while never leaving home. Here's what I have learned, sometimes painfully:

If You Don't Choose Contentment, Resentment Will Steal It From You

Contentment and *Resentment* cannot coexist. They don't play well together.

God, I prayed for you to show up in a certain situation and you didn't. I asked you to give me a clear sign, and even fasted from Chick-fil-a sweet tea, and nothing. I'm a pastor God! What the heck are you doing? You owe me! Ever got angry w/God b/c you feel He owes you more than you are getting?

Examples: Promotion at work. Friend gets the part in the play or musical. Steal on a house just like yours. Your child should be getting more playing time; the coach doesn't share your belief. You don't receive a "thank you" for going out of your way to help somebody or recognition for completing a difficult project. You see a family that you wish yours was more like, a marriage that you wish yours more closely resembled or a parent/child relationship that you envy.

"God, why do they have such a great marriage? Why did they get the promotion, position or part? Why did they get the steal on the house and save all that \$\$\$? Why them and not me? Come on God, after all I have done serving you, going to church, tithing, and reading my Bible?!? Really?!? Resentment will steal your Contentment if you let it.

This is real life stuff. And it's so subtle and sinister in our lives. We can go to church, read our Bible, pray, be involved in small groups and never leave home but resentment can still sneak its way in to our lives. What can we do about it? When we recognize it,

when we are tempted to live in it here's what we can do: **Choose to Share, Not Compare.**

The problem with comparing: either someone else has more toys, money, connections or influence than you do which leads to complaining and resentment or they have less toys, money, connections and influence which leads to pride.

Choose to cry out to God every day for the strength to share in the joy of others and not compare ourselves to them. If we're going to allow contentment to rule our lives, we need help to live w/an attitude of gratitude for what God has given us. When I focus on what I have been given out of love by the father I am much more likely to share in someone else's joy instead of being resentful of them, or of God.

It's a discipline that won't come easy and one that we can't do on our own. We will constantly have to call on God to help us with it but it will bear fruit and results in your life. You have no idea what God is up to in their lives, nor do you know what He's planning for yours.

Luke 15:30 (NIV) **But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!**

Resentment comes out in "this son of yours". He couldn't even claim him as his brother. Instead of being grateful he was home, he was hateful.

The reason the older son was struggling to enter the party and experience the joy of the homecoming was because deep down inside he had some buried resentment. He was dealing with a self – centered, resentful heart b/c he felt he was owed better.

The joy of the father at the return of the younger son in no way means that the older son was less loved, less appreciated or less favored. The father never compares the two sons. He knows them both intimately and loves them completely. The return of the younger son causes him to call for a joyful celebration. The return of the elder son causes him to extend an invitation to be fully involved in that joy.

Luke 15:31 (NIV) **My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.**

Notice even though the older son has spoken some harsh and critical words to the father, the father does not defend himself or even bring up the older son's behavior, his attitude or the accusations.

As he speaks these words "*you are always with me, and everything I have is yours*" the father is making it perfectly clear that the relationship and the intimacy he shares with

his (lost) elder son is what matters most. The father has made him a part of his daily life, spending time with him and keeping nothing from the older son.

Don't miss this: Every day, the older son had the offer of being w/his father. While the younger son was separated from that intimacy the elder son had the opportunity to soak up the greatest gift: just *being* with the father. Just enjoying His presence. Growing his relationship w/his father. *And he missed it.*

Enjoy God's Gift of His Presence Every Day.

When is the last time you woke up in the morning and said "God, today I want to simply enjoy the greatest gift you offer – Your presence". Open my eyes to YOU!

Luke 15:32 (NIV) **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.**

Are you enjoying God's gift of His presence every day? Is your relationship marked by love, joy and intimacy? Do you find yourself content and trusting in Jesus? Or is your relationship marked by fear of consequences? Is your motive for spiritual disciplines to connect with God's heart, to grow closer to him or to make sure you do your part, so you can try to control that God does his? Are you relating to God as a slave or as his child? Resentment can make us lost, while never leaving home. Asking God for strength to Choose contentment can help you and me overcome that. To share in the joy of others rather than compare and every day enjoy the gift of God's presence. And when we live that way, not only will God celebrate, but so will we.

Small Group Questions

1. What was the best part of your past week and the most difficult part of your past week and why?
2. Have you ever been lost out in nature? Share about your experience.
3. Read Luke 15:11 – 32. On the surface this looks like a story that separates the two brothers into the good one and the bad one. But only one person in this story is good. Who is it? How do you see the goodness of the father play out in this parable? How have you seen God's goodness in your life recently?
4. What does the older brother do upon hearing about the return of his younger brother and the celebration for him? How does the father respond to the older brother? What is driving the anger of the older brother?
5. Re-read Luke 15:29 - 30. How do these verses show how lost the older son was, even though he never left home? What motives does the older brother reveal

about why he served his father? What did the older brother hope to get in return for serving his father?

6. Steve said, "If you don't choose contentment, resentment will steal it from you". Have you found that to be true in your life? Share about it. What are some avenues that resentment has used to subtly sneak into your life and disrupt your relationship with God, the Father? How can we effectively fight resentment and instead choose contentment?
7. How does the father respond to the older sons' accusations and critical words in Luke 15:31? The older brother had been with his father the entire time, day after day but he missed the greatest gift. What was it? How can resentment keep us from enjoying God's gift of His presence every day?
8. Is your relationship with your heavenly Father consistently marked by love, joy and intimacy? If not, what is keeping you from that? What helps you connect with God's heart? Are you learning to be content and trust in Him? Share about that process.
9. Close in prayer asking God to give you strength to choose contentment and share in the joy of others, rather than allowing resentment and comparisons to rule your day.