

Extended Sermon Outline

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32 — What Is the Gospel?

I. Introduction: The Context of Jesus' Teaching

Large crowds were gathering around Jesus, and among them were two very different groups of people. On one side were the tax collectors and sinners — people who were despised by society for their dishonesty and immorality. On the other side were the Pharisees and scribes — highly respected for their morality, discipline, and religious commitment. When the Pharisees saw Jesus receiving sinners and even eating with them, they grumbled in disapproval. Jesus answered their criticism, not with an argument, but with three parables about things that are lost: a sheep, a coin, and two sons. In these parables, Jesus shows what the gospel truly is and how it confronts both the openly immoral and the outwardly moral.

II. The Younger Brother — Lost in Open Rebellion

The younger son comes to his father and demands his share of the inheritance, even though his father is still alive. In that culture, this was like saying, “I wish you were dead.” It was a shameful and shocking request. Even more surprising, the father grants it. The son takes the money, travels to a far country, and wastes everything in reckless living.

When a famine comes, the younger son finds himself destitute. He takes the most humiliating job imaginable for a Jewish man — feeding pigs — and he becomes so desperate that he longs to eat the food the pigs are eating. At rock bottom, he decides to return to his father. He prepares a speech in which he admits his sin, but he also plans to ask if he can work as a hired servant, repaying what he has squandered. Even in his repentance, he is still thinking in terms of earning back his place.

But as he approaches home, the father sees him while he is still a long way off. The father has been watching and waiting for him. Filled with compassion, the father runs to his son — an undignified act for a man of his status — and embraces him. Before the son can finish his rehearsed speech, the father interrupts and orders that the best robe, a ring, and sandals be brought for him. He calls for a feast, declaring, “My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” The father restores the son completely, not on the basis of repayment but on the basis of grace.

III. The Older Brother — Lost in Self-Righteousness

While the feast is taking place, the older brother returns from working in the field. He hears music and dancing, and when he learns that his younger brother has been welcomed home and celebrated, he becomes angry. He refuses to go inside, publicly insulting his father by staying outside.

When the father comes out to him, the older brother vents his bitterness. He says, “I have slaved for you and never disobeyed your commands, yet you never gave me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends.” His words reveal that he does not see himself as a beloved son but as an underpaid servant. He is keeping score and resents his father’s generosity. The older brother refuses to acknowledge the younger as his brother, calling him “this son of yours.”

The father again responds with gentleness and love. He reminds his older son, “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” He urges him to see things differently: “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” The parable ends without telling us whether the older brother goes inside, leaving the Pharisees — and us — to decide how we will respond to the Father’s grace.

IV. The Gospel Thread in the Parable

This story shows us that both sons are lost, though in different ways. The younger son is lost through his open rebellion and immoral lifestyle. The older son is lost through his pride, resentment, and self-righteousness. One runs away from the father by breaking the rules; the other rejects the father by keeping the rules and demanding a reward. Both sons need the father’s grace.

There is also something unusual about this parable compared to the first two. In the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin, someone goes out to search until the lost thing is found. But in the parable of the lost sons, no one goes looking for the younger brother. In that culture, it would have been the older brother’s responsibility to seek out his sibling. He should have gone to bring him home. But he doesn’t.

The point is that we need a true older brother, one who will not resent us but will come after us. Jesus Himself is that true older brother. He left His Father’s house to seek us when we were far away. He paid the cost of our return by dying on the cross. He clothes us, not in our rags, but in His robe of righteousness. He restores us as sons and daughters of God, not servants.

V. Application: What Is the Gospel?

This parable shows us what the gospel is not, and what it truly is. The gospel is not moralism, the way of the older brother, which says, “If I am good and obey the rules, then God owes me blessing.” The gospel is also not relativism, the way of the younger brother, which says, “I can live however I want, and it doesn’t matter.” Both paths leave us lost.

The gospel is the good news that God, in His grace, restores us through Jesus Christ. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He bore our punishment, and He gives us His righteousness. We are received into the Father’s house, not as servants who must earn our place, but as beloved children who are freely welcomed.

This gospel changes our lives. It gives us a secure identity, because we do not achieve sonship by our performance but receive it as a gift. It reshapes our relationships, because grace frees us to forgive and love others. And it transforms our obedience, because we no longer serve God out of fear or pride, but out of gratitude and joy.

VI. Connection to Baptism

Baptism is the outward sign of this inward reality. When we are baptized, we are buried with Christ in His death and raised with Him in new life. Baptism proclaims that we do not enter God’s family by earning it but by being clothed in Christ. Both the rebellious younger brother and the self-righteous older brother must come home to the Father the same way — through Jesus, the true older brother, who makes us children of God.

VII. Conclusion and Invitation

The parable ends with the older son standing outside, refusing to enter. The story forces us to ask: will we come inside and join the Father’s feast? Will we accept the grace of God through Jesus Christ?

The gospel is clear: We were lost. Jesus came to find us. The Father restores us by grace. Today, God invites us to come home — not as servants, but as beloved sons and daughters in Christ.