

The Parables of Jesus: The Story of Two Lost Sons Sunday, 9/1/19

1 One lost sheep out of one hundred, one lost coin out of ten, and now, one lost son out of two- or so it would appear. We continue this morning with Luke's trilogy of the lost, a very pointed response by Jesus to the uptight Jewish religious leaders who simply couldn't abide Jesus hanging out with the notable sinners around town. We know from the progression of numbers- 100 to 10 to 2 that Jesus is getting ready to deliver the punch line in this last of the three parables. And Jesus doesn't disappoint, saving the most involved story for last, with hooks to bait the Pharisees and then a surprise twist at the end to reveal to them the hypocrisy of their accusations.

Jesus set them up with a story they couldn't help but respond to viscerally. Everything about the story of the prodigal son was designed to get the Pharisees incensed. First, the son demanded his share of his father's inheritance, which was basically the same thing as saying, "Father, I wish you were dead." It simply didn't happen. The Pharisees would have been scandalized both by the son's disrespect and the father's laxity in giving him what he asked for. Next, the son's squandering of the money, from which we get the term "prodigal," would have been seen by the Pharisees at least as a moral failing if not outright sinful. Finally, there were the pigs. Have any of you raised hogs? There's a reason we use the term "pig pen" to describe a room that's messy or dirty. But beyond that, no faithful Jew would have touched or been in the presence of pigs, let alone take a job tending them, because that was prohibited by Jewish law. By now the Pharisees listening to the story most likely had a full head of steam, delighting that the sinful son got what he deserved.

If we ended the parable at this point, it could easily pass for a morality story about obedience to your parents and the importance of the wise stewardship of money. That's a good story, and maybe you or someone you know has been lost in that way, living from day to day in careless self-gratification with no real plan for how to make your resources last into the future. If that's you, take note. I meet prodigal children all the time, people stuck eating with the pigs. People who have crashed financially because of their self-absorption and wasteful spending. People who don't have the skills, attitudes, or resources to turn their lives around. It's very sad. But the full parable as Jesus told it really has very little to do with how we spend our money, as we see as we move to the last two surprising scenes in the parable.

2 Grace is a term we're so used to hearing today that we sometimes forget how astonishing it would have been in Jesus' day. The father's restoration of the son who was lost to disobedience and spendthrift living was nothing less than grace, something the son received that he very clearly didn't deserve. It's not even clear that the son was truly repentant. It was hunger that drove him back into the arms of his father rather than a sudden understanding and rejection of the depth of his broken and harmful behavior. Shouldn't the father have sent the son away, explaining that he had created his own pig pen and now had to live in it? That's certainly what the Pharisees would have expected, or perhaps even a refusal to even talk to the son.

I wonder if there's been a time in your life when you've had that very experience: Someone has turned their back on you, or you've sent someone away because of their offense. The Old Testament law absolutely endorses that penalty. But the new law, the law of love ushered in by Jesus, commands an altogether different response, a response of grace. At this point in the story, the ire of the Pharisees would rest squarely on the foolish father, who has now doubly proven that he has no wisdom in failing to discipline his lost son.

3 But the punchline is saved for the last act of the parable, where we unexpectedly meet the oldest of the two sons, who turns out to be lost in a different way. I'm reading now the conclusion of the parable from Luke 15, beginning with verse 25. {Read Luke 15:25-32, The Message}

4 This is the best illustration I've ever seen of the attitude of the Pharisees, but also of the older brother. I have to admit that I myself am a recovering Pharisee, and my earliest years as a Christian we're rather firmly rooted in a "following all the rules" kind of faith. Perhaps that's a natural way to begin for any Christian. It's much simpler to try to follow black and white rules than to live in a perpetual tension between law and grace. How about you? Is that where you started in your faith? Is that where you are now?

In the older brother we see an image of the Pharisees that is finally revealed to be completely bankrupt. What are the signs that the older brother is also lost? Like his younger brother, he is disobedient and disrespectful to his father, refusing to join the party and even failing to address his father as "sir." The older brother is irrational. As the oldest son, he was entitled to two-thirds of his father's estate, none of which was jeopardized by the younger

son spending his third. And the older brother is distraught, angry instead of joyful, filled with poison instead of gladness. In all three parables in Luke's trilogy of the lost, there's a party filled with gladness when the lost is found. In this third story alone, we find someone who's not glad. Underneath all of his unhappiness, the older brother is basically outraged that his younger brother got away with breaking the rules. Can't you just see him putting his hands on his hips and shouting, red-faced, to his father, "It's not fair!"

Can you see how this is a rebuke and a challenge to the Pharisees, who were outraged not only that sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes were breaking the rules, but that Jesus himself was breaking the rules by associating with them? Remember that the main point of a parable is often found in a contrast of two or more things. The important contrast in this parable isn't really between the two sons. They were both lost, stuck in their own pig pens of self-destructive attitudes. The real contrast of interest here is between the attitude and behavior of the father and the oldest son, and by extension, the attitudes and behaviors of Jesus and the Pharisees.

Jesus isn't saying that the rules are not important. Jesus is saying that the state of the heart is more important, and whenever and however it's possible for a heart that's turned away from God to find its way home again, then that becomes the ultimate priority. Like Jesus, we and the other Pharisees like us need to get our hearts aligned with Jesus, focusing less on the judgment of those who aren't following the rules and more on the mission and joy or bringing the lost home, recognizing that we ourselves become lost when we allow judgment to trump grace. The two attitudes couldn't be more different. One is filled with self-righteous indignation, the other with compassion and joy. I want more compassion in joy in my life. Don't you?

5 There's a story I've shared with you before about a runaway daughter in Philip Yancey's book, *What's so Amazing about Grace*. It's such a good story I'm going to share it again.

Disgusted with her old fashioned parents who overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts, a daughter runs away. She ends up in Detroit where she meets a pimp and she goes to work for him as a prostitute. Things are ok for a while until she gets sick, and then he turns mean and turns her out on the street.

One night, while sleeping on a city street, she begins to wonder if she might be able to go home. She calls home and leaves a message. “Mom, dad, it’s me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I’m catching a bus up your way... If you’re not there, I’ll understand.” During the seven-hour bus ride, she’s preparing a speech for her father.

When the bus finally arrives at her home town, she walks into the bus terminal not knowing what to expect. But not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepares her for what she sees. There stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and a great-grandmother to boot. They’re all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the bus terminal is a banner that reads – Welcome Home!

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes and begins her memorized speech. But he interrupts her. “Hush, child. We’ve got no time for that.” And they welcome her home to a huge party.

6 If you were a character in that last story, which one would you be? Would you be the runaway daughter who desperately needs and wants to find a way to get home? Are you the grace-filled parent, ready to set aside all judgment for the joy of welcoming your wayward child home? Or are you someone in the crowd that’s gathered at the bus terminal, mentally taking an inventory of the runaway’s disobedience, confident that she brought all of this upon herself?

God loves the prostitutes and the prodigals, the runaways and the addicts, and everyone else that the world has turned its back on. Maybe you’re separated from your family or church because of something you’ve done or said, something you feel ashamed of. Maybe you feel separated from your family or church because someone has treated you badly. Maybe you struggle with a judgmental spirit, and grace is a hard thing for you to wrap your heart around. For your sake and because of what Jesus had done for you, I want you to commune with God today at his banquet table, because everyone is invited, and there is abundant joy in celebrating the grace-filled forgiveness we receive through Jesus Christ.

There are a great many ways to become lost in this world, but really only one way to get home. That way is Jesus, whose Spirit is tugging at your heart even this morning. It’s time to come home.



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