

Jesus is explaining why He associates with “sinners.” We started this chapter with a man losing one sheep out of one hundred. And yet, it was so precious to him that he searched until he found it and asked his neighbors to rejoice with him. Though we are many, God highly values each of us and goes after us when we lose our way. Then we read of the woman who lost one in ten in a special set. She too, searched until she found it. The sense is that each one makes the whole complete. When one believer is missing there is incompleteness until he or she is found. All heaven rejoices with God when the lost are found. And now we read of one out of two that is lost. The emphasis of this parable is how God longs for each one of us to come home and on the difference between the two sons. The home that God’s children long for is a place where we are embraced by the God who loves us enough to send His only Son to save our souls.

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Luke 15:11,12 In Israel, upon the death of the father of a family, the oldest son received twice the inheritance of his siblings (Deuteronomy 21:17¹). The purpose was to carry on the family estate and responsibilities. In this parable the younger son wanted his one-third of the estate before the father died. It was very unusual, as this took place long before the father was unable to care for his estate. It is as if he was saying he wanted nothing to do with family, he just wants the money. Instead of managing his third of the family property, the younger son sold it and took off.

This reminds me of a recent commercial. A young man is at home watching TV. The trash around him indicates that he is messy. His mom is picking up the trash and shaking her head. He calls a company that will pay him cash for a settlement that is paid to him over time. Of course, the company takes a good portion of total. The young man says, “It’s my money and I want it now!” He’ll get it now, minus 20% or more. That’s the attitude of the reckless young man in the parable. He wants to get away from his parents. A shocking factor in the story is that the father went ahead and gave it to him.

¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. Luke 15:13 Looks like he couldn’t wait to leave. Going into a far country was not unusual. Jews were adventurous and often took opportunities that Rome presented to pioneer a new city. It offered lots of financial opportunities and many Jews became quite wealthy from the tax-free incentives that were offered. The diaspora was not always abroad because of persecution. Jews often chose to take advantage of these business opportunities.

Instead of investing his money in business, the younger brother squandered his money in reckless living. In these Roman start up towns, there were also those who offered various vices to the wealthy who had come seeking opportunities. Being young and inexperienced, he fell victim to his passions and wasted his inheritance. You could say he was self-actualizing, experiencing everything his young heart desired.

¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. Luke 15:14-16 Regional famines could drive the price of food sky high. He had spent all he had, so he became desperate to

have enough to eat. He had to take any job he could. Pigs were unclean to Jews (Leviticus 11:7ⁱⁱ). To care for them was humiliating and perhaps a spiritual wake up call to how low his sins had taken him. He was so desperate he wanted to eat the pig slop, but no one gave him any.

¹⁷ *“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!’* Luke 15:17 “He came to himself.” Where had he been? We might say that he was not in his right mind. Passion for pleasure had taken over his ability to reason. His father had taught him what was right, but in his pleasure binge he had set aside his father's example and instructions (Proverbs 1:8ⁱⁱⁱ). Now in his desperation he is beginning to think clearly, and his thoughts turned to his father (Proverbs 22:6^{iv}). Times of crisis can cause us to search our hearts.

Too often we live on autopilot, just following our desires without applying the truth we know or thinking clearly. We know something is bad for our health, but we do it anyway. We know some action is unkind and selfish, but we excuse it and pretend it doesn't matter. Jesus is saying we aren't thinking rightly when we do those things. It reminds us of Paul looking back on his days under the Law in Romans 7. The good he wanted to do he couldn't do. The evil he didn't want to do he did (Romans 7:15^v). In that case he was thinking clearly because of the Word of God, but he lacked the power to act accordingly (Romans 8:13^{vi}; 11^{vii}).

The Apostle Paul calls this problem our *sarx* nature (Romans 7:18^{viii}). It is translated as flesh, but it literally means what is under the flesh. In other words, our carnal bodily desires, like those of an animal. Animals don't reason or choose between selfishness and altruism. They don't think about the future and consequences. They simply act instinctively. The younger son came out of that mode long enough to rightly evaluate his situation. A hired servant in his father's house was better off than he was. Hired servants, unlike slaves, were not considered a part of the household and could be dismissed at any time. He was thinking he could work to pay the father back for his wrongs. Just maybe the father's love would override his sense of justice and allow him to attempt to make amends. At least then he could eat with the hired hands.

¹⁸ *I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”*” Luke 15:18,19 Now in his right mind and able to see clearly his true condition, he decided to go home and confess his sins against God and his father (1 John 1:9^{ix}). He realized that his behavior was offensive to God. That is clear thinking. The consequences of sinful behavior have a way of helping us see ourselves as God sees us. That humbles us and shows us the wickedness in our hearts that brought us to those conditions. I have had friends who didn't turn their lives around until they woke up in a hospital finally realizing their addiction was killing them.

He had also sinned against his father. One of the commandments is to honor our parents (Exodus 20:12^x). We are to honor our parents not only with words, but also by the way we live. If people saw this man's behavior, it would reflect badly on his parents. This father deserved better. The son recognized his sin of dishonoring him.

²⁰ *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* Luke 15:20 The father had been watching and hoping for his son's return. He spotted his form a

great distance away. As soon as he knew it was indeed his son, he ran to welcome him home, falling on his neck and kissing him.

Running was undignified for a father, especially one who owned an estate. But He was overcome with emotion. His heart welled up with compassion knowing that the son was surely a broken man to return home empty handed. He embraced him and kissed him repeatedly (the original Greek tense). What a scene!

This is how God welcomes home the broken, repentant sinner. It is with compassion, great joy, and love that He welcomes the wayward soul home. He is watching and waiting for our return, knowing we have come to ourselves by the grace of God. The Holy Spirit has convicted us of sin and encouraged us to seek the gracious compassion and forgiveness of God made possible by the cross of Jesus (John 16:8^{xi}; Ephesians 1:7^{xii}).

²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² *But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.'* ²³ *And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.* Luke 15:21,22 The son started reciting his speech but only got halfway through when the father interrupted him by ordering the servants to bring the best robe, a ring, and shoes. He left home with a robe and sandals, but they had no doubt been sold to buy food. Instead of a rebuke, the father graciously replaced what was sold with even better ones than before. Then he had the servants prepare a great feast. The fattened calf was an expensive item kept only for very special occasions such as a wedding. Meat was a luxury item. This means the father saw this as one of the greatest events in his life, the return of a lost son.

The father didn't gain a servant; He had his son back. A calf was barbecued for the home coming party which may have included the whole village. The son had wasted so much, but the father was sparing no expense to welcome him home.

In the New Testament the best robe is a robe of the righteousness of Christ (Romans 13:14^{xiii}). The sandals are the readiness to share the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15^{xiv}). The ring may have been a signet ring which gave the wearer the authority to represent the household, which is what we do when we pray in the name of Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:20^{xv}). We are also destined for a feast called the Wedding Feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9^{xvi}). These things are ours when we return to our senses and come home to our heavenly Father who is watching for us.

²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' *And they began to celebrate.* Luke 15:24 Here is the reason for such extravagant grace. For all the father knew, the son was dead. But now he is not only alive but is back home. He had been lost to the family but was now found. The feasting began! We too were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God has made us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5^{xvii}).

Remember that this is in the context of a response to the Pharisees complaining about Jesus eating and drinking with "sinners." Jesus is pointing out the joy God has when one sinner repents. In the first two parables the lost is sought out. Perhaps that is because the sheep didn't know its way back and the coin has no will of its own. In this one, the family member comes to himself and returns, repentant and contrite. We must respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, for unlike the situation with the sheep and the coin, God has given us a conscience. God is not reluctant to take prodigals back. He

takes us back with an abundance of grace and joy. We were spiritually dead, but in His embrace we have new life in Jesus (Romans 5:10^{xviii})!

²⁵ *“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.”* ²⁶ *And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.* Luke 15:25,26 The story now turns to the older son. We can all relate to the bad boy who realizes how selfish and ungrateful he has been. We all applaud the reconciliation. But now we turn to another kind of sinfulness. It is the arrogance of thinking we can earn God’s forgiveness through good works. It was what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law and many of us fail to see.

What was left of the estate would belong to the older brother when the father died or was no longer able to manage it. He heard the celebration and called a servant over to ask what was going on. ²⁷ *And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’* Luke 15:27 The servant relayed exactly what had happened. The lost brother was home safe and sound, so of course the father was celebrating.

²⁸ *But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,* ²⁹ *but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.’* ³⁰ *But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’* Luke 15:28-30 The older brother was mad and boycotted the party. He was the one now refusing to be a part of the family and dishonoring his father. He thought, “Why should such foolish brother be doted over? Why even allow him back home? Why not throw a party for my faithful years of service instead? Wouldn't that be more appropriate?”

Perhaps he was even concerned the father would leave his younger brother another portion of what the older brother now considered his possessions. He imagined his brother had wasted the property on prostitutes. That fattened calf was essentially his and whatever the brother would get now came out of what would one day belong to him. He complained that he never was given a goat for a feast with friends. I wonder if he ever asked for one.

The older brother felt he deserved better because of his faithful obedience. In other words, his good behavior wasn't out of love, but was in expectation of what he would receive. In a way, both brothers' motivations were the same. They just went about different ways to get it. Neither put the father first.

His reasoning is typical of our complaints to God. It sounds like the Jews in the wilderness. “There is no water. Moses, did you bring us out here to die of thirst because there were not enough graves in Egypt” (Exodus 14:11^{xix}; 17:3^{xx})? Our complaints often sound more like, “Why is that guy prospering when he cheated me? Where is your justice God? Now he’s slandering me and getting away with it. What good is to be fair and honest?” We think we should tell God what He should do, as if we knew better. It reveals we are not acting out of love for God, but because of what we think He owes us.

³¹ *And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’* ³² *It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”* Luke 15:31,32 The father's answer was a reality check. To the older son whining, “Me, me, me,” the father assured the son that the entire estate was his. But it was only right to celebrate the return of the younger brother. He is family. They

thought him dead, but he is alive. They thought they would never see him again, but he is back safe and sound.

Such is the heavenly Father's joy when one of His children comes to him or her self and returns home to His open arms. He runs to greet us. Can you see the father pulling up his robe to his knees with a joyous smile on his face, and tears running down his cheeks, as he runs to embrace his son? There is not a word of condemnation, only restoration and celebration.

The older brother is a picture of the religious Pharisee types who were indignant that Jesus ate with wayward sinners. They could not understand why the heavenly Father would lavish such a celebration on those people. Why didn't Jesus hang out with them because they were so good at keeping the Law? They couldn't see that they were just as sinful in their self-righteous expectations. They didn't understand God's grace or see how desperately they needed it (Ephesians 2:8,9^{xxi}).

That's why Jesus made the parable in a form they could relate. Many of them had sons. The parable spoke to their hearts and it should speak to ours as well. Some of you have a prodigal child. You can relate to the joy you will have when they come to their senses and realize how much you love them and want the best for them.

Jesus threw a curve ball in the end by explaining the older brother's reliance on good works was dishonoring his father. The selfishness of the Pharisees' hearts was demonstrated by the older brother's anger at his brother's return. How we react to the salvation of younger brothers is an indicator of our hearts' condition (Luke 6:45^{xxii}).

One more shocking factor was that the story ended without an answer to what happened to the older brother. He was leaving the ending to the Pharisees' individual responses, and to all of us "good" people to decide how it will end for us. Will we humble ourselves and see our self-righteousness is just as offensive to God as wild living is? Can we repent of thinking we are so good that God owes us something? Are our good actions because of what's in it for us or out of love for God? **We each write the ending with our own response to the parable.** God owes us nothing. We owe Him everything!

Last week we focused on how to engage the culture. The audience could almost feel the love of God in the descriptions. I hope you could. Then He used the illustration of the older brother so that the "good" people could ponder where they stood in God's eyes. May God give us wisdom to answer people in a similar way (1 Peter 3:15^{xxiii}).

Do you remember when you returned, and the Father embraced you? Remember that realization of compassion and grace you experienced. Remember this robe of righteousness we wear, along with the ring and sandals are all undeserved (1 Corinthians 4:7^{xxiv}). When we remind ourselves of His love and compassion, it draws our hearts to love Him (1 John 4:19^{xxv}). A feast is coming for us too, the best of heaven. How unworthy we are! How gracious and loving He is (Luke 12:37^{xxvi})!

And finally let us pray with faith for our lost children and grandchildren that they will come to themselves. Pray that they will see that all the world has to offer is pig slop. Pray that they will become desperate enough to remember home and what you told them of Jesus and His love for them. The world will eventually leave them feeling empty and desperate. Pray they will turn to Jesus when that time comes. And pray that all of us who think we are good enough for God will see how arrogant we are and repent of our self-righteousness. Only when we see how gracious He is to us and experience His forgiveness can we serve Him out of unselfish love.

Questions

- 1 Review the question and two previous pictures?
- 2 What was unusual about the request and response?
- 3 What was the sin of the younger brother?
- 4 What changed his mind?
- 5 What was his plan?
- 6 How and why did the plan change?
- 7 What do we see of God in the father's response?
- 8 What do the gifts represent?
- 9 What was the older brother's sin?
- 10 What ending will you write with your life?

ⁱ **Deuteronomy 21:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

ⁱⁱ **Leviticus 11:7 (ESV)**

⁷ And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Proverbs 1:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching,

^{iv} **Proverbs 22:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

^v **Romans 7:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

^{vi} **Romans 8:13 (ESV)**

¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

^{vii} **Romans 8:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

^{viii} **Romans 7:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

^{ix} **1 John 1:9 (ESV)**

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

^x **Exodus 20:12 (ESV)**

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

^{xi} **John 16:8 (ESV)**

⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

^{xii} **Ephesians 1:7 (ESV)**

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,

^{xiii} **Romans 13:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

^{xiv} **Ephesians 6:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

^{xv} **2 Corinthians 5:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

^{xvi} **Revelation 19:9 (ESV)**

⁹ And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

^{xvii} **Ephesians 2:5 (ESV)**

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

^{xviii} **Romans 5:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

^{xix} **Exodus 14:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?"

^{xx} **Exodus 17:3 (ESV)**

³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

^{xxi} **Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)**

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

^{xxii} **Luke 6:45 (ESV)**

⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

^{xxiii} **1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

^{xxiv} **1 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV)**

⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

^{xxv} **1 John 4:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

^{xxvi} **Luke 12:37 (ESV)**

³⁷ Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.