

## Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Today's sermon text is the parable of the Prodigal Son. We will read each portion of the text as we come to it.

### Lost and Found

#### I.

Jesus had a PR problem—a public relations problem. This was not a minor PR problem; it was serious. People had been saying that Jesus might just possibly be the Messiah who had long been foretold and had long been promised. What he was accused of here would jeopardize his status.

“All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him” (Luke 15:1, EHV). Tax collectors were singled out because they had a reputation of being among the most dishonest men in society. They became rich by gouging people and overcharging what was actually owed to the government, keeping huge sums of money for themselves. “Sinners” were the worst of society. Perhaps today gangs and street people and prostitutes and thieves would be lumped into the group of “sinners.”

Jesus attracted these outcasts of society. While they were despised and rejected by society, Jesus did not turn them away.

“But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2, EHV). Therein lies the PR problem. Rabbinitism—that is, the teachings and traditions of rabbis—had a saying in the Talmud—that is, a collection of important reference works for rabbis. The saying went like this: “Distance yourself from those who are ungodly, lawless and unjust” (<https://bit.ly/2WtyLiU>). This was taken so seriously that the rabbis would not associate with such people—not even to teach them the law. Jesus not only was *associating* with reprobates, he was actually *eating* with them. Even beyond that, Jesus was *welcoming* such people, even *inviting* them to come and join him and speak with him. How could he do such a thing? This was a serious lapse of judgment. It might even rise to the level of “unforgivable” in the society of Rabbis.

“He told them this parable...” (Luke 15:3, EHV). A parable is a teaching tool. When an opportunity presents itself, a good teacher will take a little time and use the situation to make a larger point. Jesus, of course, is the Master Teacher. The tax collectors and “sinners” could learn a few things from what followed. So, too, could the Pharisees. In fact, every generation of people who listen to Jesus has much to learn from his parable. The parable is about restoration.

“A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had and traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless living” (Luke 15:11-13, EHV).

Family business can be difficult sometimes. This father had a business—the family farm. Custom dictated that when a man died, his property was divided among his heirs. The oldest would get two portions, the rest would receive one. Since this man had only two sons, there were but three shares of property—two for the oldest, and one for the youngest.

The man typically known as the Prodigal Son seems to have a death-wish for his father.

He wants his inheritance long *before* his father dies. In fact, asking for his “share” means that the business has to limp along with fewer assets than what it really *should* have.

Never-the-less, the man graciously gives the younger son his inheritance.

The prodigal leaves. He does not stray, nor does he fall away from the path—he wilfully departs. He heads for a “distant” country. He didn’t want to be too close to his old man—that old geezer didn’t really know all that much, anyway.

Freedom! In a distant country he could do what he pleased, without any interference from some fuddy-duddy who simply couldn’t keep up with the times.

What a jerk! That’s the response that immediately comes to mind. Who among us wouldn’t be tempted to think: “I hope he gets what he deserves!”?

“After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything” (Luke 15:14-16, EHV).

He got what he deserved. All he had was gone. People he thought of as friends disappeared when the money dried up.

When your money is gone, and your friends with it, and you hit rock bottom, it forces you to take whatever job you can to feed yourself. Feeding pigs was not a job a good Jewish young man would take, but he was desperate. *Anything* to make a little bit of money for some food. But the pay wasn’t good enough to support himself. He even wanted to eat seed pods from the Carob tree. There is certainly nothing wrong with them—Carob pods are still harvested and eaten today—but this batch was probably the worst of the crop, since it was pig food.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger!’” (Luke 15:17, EHV). Ah, the good ol’ days. Down in the dumps with a job that wouldn’t even keep him alive, the Prodigal finally thought about his former home. Even the hired hands had plenty to eat there. His father treated his employees well.

“I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants’” (Luke 15:18-19, EHV).

As just a regular employee I will be treated better in my father’s household than what I’m facing here in this distant country. I’m going home. I’ll beg to just have a job on the estate.

“He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’” (Luke 15:20-21, EHV).

At first, things seem to be going as planned. Though his father should be angry with his son, he isn’t. He greets the Prodigal warmly. The son begins his plea to be treated as a servant. But before he can get anywhere...

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, <sup>24</sup>because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’ Then they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:22-24, EHV).

This is not the reception the Prodigal was looking for. Father fires up the BBQ and starts

grilling some steaks. The best clothing is brought out for his son and a celebration begins. What an unusual ending to the story this seemed to be! This was beyond anything the Prodigal could have hoped for! His father welcomed him like a son, despite the fact that he didn't deserve it.

## II.

This was not the ending to the story the Pharisees or anyone else was expecting. The fate of the Prodigal in the distant country was what he justly deserved. *This* reception by a forgiving father was beyond generous. Perhaps Jesus was trying to tell them that tax collectors and “sinners” needed to be treated with a little more respect.

“His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>The servant told him, ‘Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>The older brother was angry and refused to go in” (Luke 15:25-28, EHV).

The older son was dutifully working out in the fields when all this transpired. He was still taking care of the family business. As he came in, he could hear the party. When he learned the reason for the celebration, he was ticked.

“His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>He answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I’ve been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’” (Luke 15:28-30, EHV).

“Not fair!” is the protest. The oldest’s indignation is well-founded. At least, it certainly seems to be. Look, dad, I’ve always been here for you. *I’ve* been the one slaving away at this business. *I’ve* been the steady one—the one who has selflessly put everything on the line for you. You haven’t shown *me* any kind of courtesy. Not even a couple Little Caesar’s pizzas for me to have a little get-together with *my* friends; and here you are—throwing steaks on the grill for this other kid you call a son. He’s certainly no brother of *mine*.

Which of the brothers do you identify with? The way Jesus tells the story, the Prodigal is the sympathetic figure, so we immediately try to identify with him. But is that correct? Are you one of the despised and rejected who would be lumped in with the tax collectors and the sinners? Are you one like the Prodigal who would not be ashamed to confess that you need help?

Too often we act more like the older son. The older son was not spoiled and pampered, don’t get me wrong. He worked. He worked *hard*. He saw himself as *entitled* to good favor from his father. *That* seems more like many Christians of today.

You show up in church. You worship the Lord. You are here, working in his Kingdom. You are here, tending to the needs of the congregation—the “business” of the Heavenly Father. You *deserve* his favor.

That, too often, is how we act.

## III.

“The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. <sup>32</sup>But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found’” (Luke 15:31-32, EHV).

It is appropriate to rejoice over the tax collectors and “sinners” when they repent and convert. The father repeated his declaration that had begun the feast. “The one who was dead is alive again. He was lost and is found.”

It’s not fair. Yet God is God. “If you, Lord, kept a record of guilt, O Lord, who could stand? <sup>4</sup> But with you there is pardon” (Psalm 130:3-4, EHV). The father showed mercy on his Prodigal Son. He gave everything to a son who deserved nothing.

“My soul will surely rejoice in my God, because he clothed me in garments of salvation. In a robe of righteousness he covered me” (Isaiah 61:10, EHV). Just like the father with the Prodigal Son in the parable, the Heavenly Father covers our tattered rags, wrapping us up in Jesus’ righteousness. He gives us the status of beloved sons and daughters of his kingdom. “See the kind of love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1, EHV). We once were dead, but now we are alive, just as the father in the parable said of his son: “We know that we have crossed over from death to life” (1 John 3:14, EHV).

In one of the earlier parables in this same chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus said: “I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10, EHV).

The climax of Jesus’ parable helps us to understand. The tax collectors and sinners need to repent and be forgiven by a loving Heavenly Father. So do the arrogant and condescending believers who think we have managed to earn God’s favor by our tireless efforts.

It is only Jesus’ work for us that grants us any favor with the Heavenly Father. He died to take our sins of squandering the good things God has blessed us with, as well as the sins of believing we should have it all because we are so righteous. He paid for us all. He invites all of us, sinners though we are, to come and sit with him and listen to him and learn from him. He invites us to dine with him at the heavenly meal he has prepared and laid out for us today in his Supper.

#### IV.

You will notice that Jesus doesn’t tie up the loose ends of the parable. We don’t know what the oldest son’s response was to his father’s explanation.

How does the story end for you? Are you the prodigal welcomed home and grateful for the Father’s love? Are you the older son, and now you finally understand and *also* welcome your brothers and sisters who were once sinners, but are saints like you—washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Or do you turn your back and walk away in anger as the sinners come in, no less wasteful and hateful than the Prodigal when he first left for a distant country to do things his own way?

God grant that each of us are repentant sinners who look for God’s full grace and mercy, no matter where we have once been in our lives. Amen.