



Luke 15:11-32
The Path of Jesus' Life
The Greatest Story Ever

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This morning we continue our series looking at the path of Jesus' life. And we've really been focusing on his ministry, his vision for the Kingdom of God, what the values were that he emphasized in his ministry, how he cast that vision and emphasized the values, and so forth.

And we see that continuing with today's passage as well. This is one of the greatest short stories ever told. In fact in 1953, William Barclay – the Scottish pastor and author of an entire commentary series on the New Testament – wrote these words, **“Not without reason this has been called the greatest short story in the world” (William Barclay, 1953).** This is an important parable that Jesus tells, that sheds a lot of light on who God is and what it means to be in relationship with him.

Now, this is actually the third of three straight parables in Luke 15 that Jesus tells, which all communicate the same message: **Lost people matter to God.** And by “lost” Jesus clearly means people who are not in a relationship with God their heavenly father, the creator of everything seen and unseen. Just as relationships between people can be broken by pride, apathy, misunderstanding, and other things, so can our relationship with God be broken. And when anyone is in a place like that with God, one of the ways Jesus describes that is to say that they are “lost.”

And this isn't a criticism or judgment against anyone. We don't need to be ashamed or embarrassed to be lost. We don't need to hide from God as though he will scold us for being lost. Every person on the face of the planet gets lost in the wilderness away from God, including Christians. So there's no judging about being lost, and God loves people who are lost. And in these parables, we see that “lost” people matter to God. He doesn't write off lost people. He doesn't ignore them. He doesn't lose interest in them. God loves them.

We see this theme that “God loves lost people” throughout Jesus' ministry, and it is a central piece of his vision for the Kingdom of God

and a central piece of his mission. And in this passage there are two different kinds of lost people that matter to God. The first is shown in the younger son, who is clearly turning his back on his father and chooses to head off on his own. This is a kind of “deliberate lostness”...a deliberate breaking of the relationship. The second is more of a “hidden lostness” that is shown in the older son who on the surface seems to be “just fine” in his relationship with his father. His behavior and his words at the return of his younger brother, however, are a window into his true heart condition, and we see that everything is not in fact “fine.” His heart is not as pure and as aligned with his father’s as it might appear on the surface. He is, in many ways, just as lost as his younger brother was, and in some ways more dangerously so because it is hidden.

Now, let’s set the context for this. First, in Luke 15:1-2, we see that tax collectors and “sinners” were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Jewish religious elite observed this and couldn’t believe that Jesus would welcome these people in his company. We see this same kind of scenario throughout Jesus’ ministry. Then Luke tells us that Jesus told these three parables which are designed to speak to both groups of people and share with them something about the grace of God.

The first is a parable about a sheep that’s lost from the other 99, and the shepherd heads out to look for the one. The second parable is about a woman who has ten coins and loses one, and she goes and looks for the one until it’s found. **In both of these instances, neither the sheep nor the coin were able to get back into the sheep pen or into the piggy bank on their own.** This point is especially clear with the parable of the coin, because it’s an inanimate object. Even if it fell on the ground and landed “heads” instead of “tails” it’s not even looking to be found! ☺ It doesn’t even know it’s lost. But the woman still looks for the coin, and the shepherd goes and looks for the sheep. These stories illustrate God taking the initiative to go and look for that which is lost. **And sometimes, as is the case in these two parables, we are lost and we don’t even realize it.** We think everything is fine and dandy...or in the case of the sheep, a lost sheep might realize it’s lost (everything isn’t fine and dandy), but it doesn’t know how to get back to the shepherd. It’s confused; it’s uncertain, and so forth. And so in both instances, we see that

God comes looking for us with great concern and passion.

In the parable of the prodigal son, there's a greater emphasis on the freedom of people alongside the freedom of God. And the way Jesus crafts the story is fascinating in light of birth order studies. As you probably know, first-born children, or only children, *tend* to be responsible, play by the rules more, be more conforming to standards and expectations, be more competitive and achievement-oriented. How many of you were first born, or only children? There are all the competitive people who got straight-A's.

Youngest born *tend* to be more rebellious, creative, and attention-seeking. How many of you were the youngest in your family? See, there are all the extroverted party animals, right there. A lot of this has to do with the fact that first-time parents are more cautious in their parenting and what they'll let the child do and so forth. By the time they get to their last child, even if it's just one more, things are more relaxed because the parents realize little baby Suzie will still live if she eats the dog food...and it's ok if little Johnny makes a muddy mess with the hose in the back yard because the yard doesn't get maintained well by the time you get to the last kid anyway.

And where there's a middle child or middle children, those personality types are a little harder to pin down, but they tend to be peacemakers. They tend to be agreeable, loyal, good negotiators and compromisers.¹ How many of you are middle children, meaning you have at least one older sibling and one younger? There are the people whose theme in life is, "Can't we all just get along?" None of this is hard and fast, of course...but that's kind of the "middle of the bell curve" of birth order personality types and tendencies.

And that's exactly how Jesus casts the characters here. It's the younger son who breaks the rules of the day, and really the rules of any day, and asks for his inheritance while the father (or maybe both parents – we don't know) is still alive, and then takes all that he has and goes off, footloose and fancy-free, to live the wild life. And it's the older son who plays by the rules, is the responsible one, conforms to expectations, and so forth.

So in his own freedom, the younger son wanders off...And two things

happen. First, a famine strikes the land. This is out of his control, as a lot of life circumstances are, but it has a big impact on him. Second, he eventually runs out of money. He spends it on everything that appears shiny, pleasurable, self-indulgent, and that he thinks will satisfy him. Until his money runs out. So he goes to work feeding pigs – which would be particularly ironic and abhorrent to the audience as Jesus tells the story. So he's out of money...he doesn't have any food...and verse 16 says that no one will even give him any food, which is telling us he's essentially alone. In other words, not only is he out of food and money, he's also out of friends.

When none of your so-called friends are willing to care for your basic need of eating food, even in the midst of a famine, then you know you're all alone and without any true friends. All his partying and wild living didn't generate any friends who would actually help him in his time of need...there's no true community and banding together going on here. This is a cautionary word to us about what we base our friendships on. Money, materialism, and the party life are not good foundations for friendship. And so he finally hits rock bottom. There's nothing that will sustain him, that can save him from this hole he's dug himself in to. **All his money and all his worldly experiences have not left him with anything that actually matters.** He finally recognizes that his father could bail him out, and decides to go back to his dad. Notice in verse 17 that his desire to go home is not driven by a sense of guilt because he's wronged his dad or guilt because of the choices he's made. He's not motivated by seeking forgiveness or repairing the relationship. It's his hunger that drives him. He's "starving to death" as verse 17 says, and he is being motivated completely by that.

And so: **The apology that he plans to say to his dad, and then does say in verse 21, is a means to an end: he just wants some food.** But before he even gets home and can say anything to his father, his dad sees him in the distance. He's looking for his son. He's not given up hope that he would return home. He sees him way off in the distance...he's filled with compassion, runs to his son, and welcomes him with open arms. When Jesus says that he "ran" to him, this is the word they'd use to talk about someone running in a race; Running with all that they can. That's how the father runs to him. The father is overjoyed. The choices the son has made and the reason

for his son's return don't even matter to him. Grace is extended, and a big old party is planned to celebrate his return, because, as the father says, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Then there's the older son, the one who's done everything by the book. On the surface, he seems to be the one who's happy and content and in good relationship with his father. But then a crisis occurs. It's been said that the true character of a person is how they act when no one is watching. But it's also true that: **The character of a person can be revealed when there is a crisis that comes our way.** How do we handle events, or people, that test us? Job loss, marital conflict, the death of a loved one, missing the last parking spot in a full lot. If you're a parent, you get tested and face crises of various types every day through your children. When those children become teenagers, the children think their parents are the ones bringing crises and tests into *their* lives...until the children hit their 20's or so and realize their parents have more to offer than they thought they did. But how we handle crises in our lives reveals our character and the basis of our faith.

And the crisis here is his father's response to his younger brother. He can't believe what his dad is doing for this son of his, who squandered everything...and "nothing" special has ever been done for him (which certainly wouldn't actually be true if this was real life, right?). Just the other day one of my kids said something to the effect of, "Today's been boring. We haven't done anything fun." And that was after they'd spent most of the day at the Museum of Pop Culture and the Seattle Center, having a great time. We see here that: **The elder son really was just as lost as the younger one.** The elder son's response shows us that the basis of his relationship with his dad was not in his father's love and gracious provision for him, but was instead based on his own sense of duty and responsibility and fulfilling that well, and that he's actually entitled to this grace and deserving of it. And that's living just as lost as the younger brother. Because: **He's the recipient of just as much grace as his younger brother. He fails to see that, and he fails to see all his work as a response of gratitude for the grace that's extended to him.** And so he has jealousy toward his brother, he has a complete lack of joy that his brother has returned, he has an attitude of entitlement, and he has no gratitude for all that his father has given him.

Now, remember the setting that we're given in the first two verses of chapter 15. Although Luke doesn't explicitly say that Jesus told these parables because of the attitudes of the religious leaders, there is clearly a connection being made. The religious leaders are like the older brother: they're the ones who uphold the religious rules, who are responsible, and cautious, and all that...but they have a sense of entitlement and superiority because of all their rule keeping. And the tax collectors and "sinners" are like the younger brother – more obviously walking along the wrong path of life. And Jesus is saying in this parable that the grace of God is extended to both; that being lost – whether it's lost like the younger brother or the older brother – doesn't make us unworthy of God's grace. And this is really, really good news.

Because: **Some of us have a story that's a bit like the younger brother.** Some of us have been on a path of life that pretty obviously has led us away from God. We've followed the dollar, we've spent the dollar, we've experimented with all that life has to offer: the things that the world says are pleasurable and satisfying and so forth. Maybe not to the extent of King Solomon when he wrote in Ecclesiastes that he'd tried everything under the sun and realized it was all meaningless...maybe not to the extent of the son in this story who lost it all on fast living...but some of us have tried an awful lot. For me, there was a several year stretch of my life where my focus was partying...and skiing...and music...and sports...and...I could go on, but that's probably enough of a confessional for now.

And it's not that everything under the sun is actually bad and destructive for us and so we should live as hermits. But we can keep these things in their place; keep them in perspective in light of God's amazing grace and abundant love that stretches from here into eternity. Because: **The stuff of the world isn't going to come running out to welcome us home after we wander off; only God will do that.** Wealth and experiences, and pleasures of the world aren't going to give back to us and sustain us when times get challenging – up to and including the challenge of death. That stuff is just completely insufficient. So some of us have been down that path...some of us here this morning might still even be on that path. And so for those of us who are or have been, this parable of grace is really good news, to know that

you can take the path back to your heavenly father, your creator, and he welcomes you home into his loving arms.

And then it's also really, really good news for those of us who have more-or-less walked the straight and narrow path because, as the father says to the elder son, "everything I have is yours." God pours out his blessings abundantly, and they're yours in this life and the life to come. And probably for those of us who are in this place, we just need to remember that it's all a gift of grace. We don't want to get all prideful and think that we've earned it, or that we're so special that God's grace is just for us. It's still a gift of grace for us as well. We show our gratitude through worship, through how we live, through the joy we have when a "younger brother" type of person comes into the family of God, and through faithfully serving as God calls us. But we can never forget that we're just as undeserving as anyone else, and it's all grace.

And as we can clearly see through the rest of Jesus' ministry, including his death and resurrection, God has given us this grace through Jesus Christ. That's the amazing thing. He's taken care of it all. That's why the younger son didn't need to come back and work as a servant. He's welcomed back into the family through the grace of God. And the grace of God is most profoundly seen in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This is where we experience the truth of this parable, when we trust in Jesus to bring us back into right relationship with our Creator. Whether you're here today and you've been wandering aimlessly and away from God as the younger brother had, or you've been right by the Father's side all along, or you're somewhere in between: God's grace is extended to you. He loves you as you are as this father loved both his sons. He welcomes you into his presence, and everything he has is yours. And *that* really is the greatest story ever; one that's still being written, and you and I get to be a part of it when we trust in Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ A lot of scholarly studies have been done on this, and these are simply general trends. Obviously, there is a lot of variety, and no one follows an exact pattern. A couple good little synopsis articles can be found here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/13/birth-order-personality_n_7206252.html and here: <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/family/birth-order-traits>