

JESUS' JOURNEY to the CROSS
Our Heavenly Father's Heart of Love
Luke 15
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Have you noticed how many people struggle to believe and accept God's love? His love is routinely misrepresented by people in casual conversation and often in the media. You've probably heard the question *"How could a good, loving God allow all the bad that goes on in our world to happen?"* Hurt, pain and brokenness are all around us. If God were truly loving, how could He allow all those bad things to happen? Does God really care about what happens in our world? Another statement I regularly hear spoken or at least insinuated questions God's ability to love people who have done wrong. Have you ever heard someone say something like, *"I've done too much wrong and am so undeserving. How could God possibly love me with all the bad I've done?"* God's goodness and love are often misunderstood.

The Scripture passage we're studying today is Luke chapter 15—the story of the Lost or Prodigal Son. It's a story that's well known to many of us. I love this story because it provides us with one of the clearest pictures of God's love we have in the Bible. In telling the story of "The Lost Son" Jesus emphasizes our Heavenly Father's heart of love for all people.

Before we look at Jesus' story in Luke chapter 15, I want to put this parable in context. Jesus was moving toward Jerusalem, where after being initially welcomed by the crowds on Palm Sunday, He would be arrested, tried and crucified on what we now call Good Friday. In Luke chapter 9 verse 51 we read, *"Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem."* Jesus knew He was journeying toward the cross, so He was very strategic and focused in all He was saying and doing. He talked about judgment and the cost of following Him and other difficult topics, but He also emphasized God's heart of love for people, and that's what we find in Luke chapter 15.

I invite you to find Luke chapter 15 in your Bibles or to follow along on the screen. Verses 1 and 2 give us the context.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Luke 15:1 & 2

If you're familiar with Jesus' ministry, you know this wasn't the first time the Jewish religious leaders complained about the people Jesus hung out with. One of the main tenets of Judaism was holiness. Jews drew clear lines between what was clean and what was unclean, between what was sinful and what was righteous. Close contact with people of other religions, with women in public, or with those who were known to be sinners was strictly forbidden. Jesus, however, regularly interacted with women, with foreigners and with those whose lifestyles clearly marked them as unholy. Whenever the religious leaders encountered Jesus with these people they openly criticized Him. The Pharisees, in particular told anyone who would listen that Jesus couldn't possibly be God, because God wouldn't go near the undesirables Jesus hung out with. (As an aside, let me give you a "teaser" for our sermon series this summer. Our series is called, "Encountering Jesus," and during June, July and August we're going to explore encounters Jesus had with a variety of people throughout the Gospels. Our goal in this series is remind of us of Jesus' love for all people and to help us think through how we show Jesus' love to others as we interact with them.)

In response to the complaint of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law about the kinds of people He hung out with, Jesus told three stories. I'll begin reading at verse 3...

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Luke 15:3-10

The stories of the "Lost Sheep" and the "Lost Coin" are kind of like "warm up acts" at a concert before the "main show." In these stories Jesus emphasizes the value God places on those who are separated in relationship from Him—and the celebration that occurs in heaven when those who are lost find Jesus. He's telling the religious leaders, *"Not only does God love those who are lost as much as He loves you, He celebrates those who turn to Him more than you who are already found."* Then Jesus tells the story of the "Lost Son" beginning in verse 11:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. Luke 15:11-24

Let’s not sugarcoat it. The youngest son behaved badly. This ungrateful young man demanded his inheritance from his father before his father’s death—essentially telling him, “*You’re as good as dead to me. All I want from you is your money. Give it to me now.*” And when his father gave in to his request, the young man gathered up everything he had and left home, for good, he assumed. The only details we’re given about his bad behavior while he was gone is, “*he squandered his wealth in wild living.*” His older brother offers some more detail later in the story when he complains to his father that his younger brother, “*squandered your property with prostitutes.*”

We don’t know how long it took the younger brother to waste his inheritance, but when his money was gone the only job he could find was feeding pigs for a farmer in a distant country. He finally came to his senses when he realized the slop he was feeding the pigs looked appetizing to him. When he’d reached his lowest point he cooked up a plan that he was sure would pull on the heartstrings of good ole dad—he’d travel back home, confess that he was no longer worthy to be his father’s son and ask that he be allowed to return to his father’s estate as one of the hired hands. With that plan in mind, he headed for home.

Meanwhile, his father hadn't given up on him. He looked for his beloved son every day and on the day his son came into view he set aside every thought of decorum (it wasn't proper in that culture for a distinguished man to hike his cloak up between his legs and run) and ran to his wayward son. When he reached him he threw his arms around the young man and kissed him. The young man launched into his planned speech about not being worthy to be called a son any longer and how grateful he would be just to be a servant, but the father wasn't hearing it. He gave instructions for an elaborate party and made it clear that his son had returned.

What an incredible picture of our Heavenly Father's love for each of us. Like the younger son, we've all strayed from God. Our rebellion may not have been as obvious as his, but every one of us was and continues to be in desperate need of God's grace, love and forgiveness. Jesus' story reminds us that our Heavenly Father's love is unconditional. No matter what we've done, what we're doing or what we'll do in the future, God's love and grace and forgiveness is available to us. Based on our sin, we have no business being in God's presence. We don't deserve to be his servant, let alone his child, but our Heavenly Father's love overrides anything we've done. He runs to us, wraps us up in his arms of love and calls us son or daughter. If you're here this morning and you've not received Jesus' forgiveness, acceptance and love, I encourage you to step toward Him and receive his love and forgiveness. It doesn't matter what you've done or where you currently find yourself. He longs to call you son or daughter.

The Father's heart of love for his wayward son is a prominent part of Jesus' story, but remember Jesus told this story in response to the muttering of the Pharisees and teachers of the law about his willingness to spend time with sinners. The wayward son wasn't the only son in Jesus' story. Follow along as I start reading at verse 25...

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" Luke 15:25-32

The father in the story didn't play favorites. He loved his sons equally. He loved his younger son, because as he said, "*He was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found,*" but he also loved his older son—the one who hadn't demanded his inheritance early. Unfortunately, the older son, even though he lived with his father and had never strayed from home, understood his father's love even less than his younger brother. He wasn't happy that his younger brother had returned home, he was jealous of the attention he received and angered by what he perceived as his father's failure to adequately reward him for never leaving home. He refused to celebrate or even acknowledge the wayward young man as his brother—he referred to him as "*this son of yours.*"

Jesus' story clearly contrasts the paths chosen by the younger and older sons. The younger son couldn't wait to get away from home and he refused to follow the accepted protocols of the day. Once gone, he quickly wasted all that he'd been given. The older son followed the respectable path. He stayed at home and worked hard on the family farm, biding his time until he would receive his inheritance. The differences between the two sons are stark, but they had one thing in common—they both were lost. Historically, in some circles this parable has been known as "The Parable of the Two Lost Sons."

The sons in the story had their differences, but the primary contrast in Jesus' parable is between the love of the father for his son and the lack of love the older brother had for his younger sibling. Again, remember Jesus' reason for telling the story—the religious leaders' criticism of Him for spending time with sinners (ie. younger sons). This is where I believe Jesus' parable speaks most loudly to us. Who do we most resemble, in how we love—the father or the elder son? Maybe a more important question is, "**Are you and I attuned to the forgiveness, love and grace that our Heavenly Father extends to us?**"

For the first twenty five years or so of my life, I would have identified with the older brother in the story, not because I was mean or a bad person, but because I had little appreciation for God's unconditional love and his grace. I was raised in a Christian family and regularly went to church and never really strayed from what was expected of me by my parents or the church. I knew I was saved—I had prayed many prayers asking for Jesus' forgiveness as a child—but beyond my salvation I wasn't aware of my need of God's grace. I was a good person.

Like the older brother in the story I had difficulty loving and extending grace to those who didn't meet my expectations or what I thought the Bible expected of them. My lack of understanding my own need of God's unconditional love and grace made it difficult, if not impossible, for me to unconditionally love and extend God's grace to others. My journey to receiving and understanding God's grace wasn't a quick one—and it's ongoing to this day—but personal challenges I walked through, relationships I developed with people who were very different from me in how they'd been raised and ministry to broken people who were deeply in love with Jesus and grateful for all He had done for them, helped me understand a line in a song that says, *"I'm still a man in need of a savior."*

If we are attuned to our need of God's grace and love, then we'll be quick to share his love and grace with others. If not, we'll find ourselves responding to hurting and broken people like the older son in Jesus' parable responded to his younger brother. I want to make that point again: when you and I are living with an awareness of our desperate need for God's love and grace and forgiveness and grateful for all that we receive from God, we'll naturally extend that same love and grace to others. When we lose sight of God's grace and begin to fall into the trap of thinking it's our goodness or pedigree or whatever, that earns us God's love, we'll be critical and judgmental of others who we believe don't measure up to our standards. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 the Apostle Paul emphasizes the link between our reconciliation with God and helping others to be reconciled with Him.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

It's only through God's grace and love that you're able to be in relationship with Him...not through who you are or because of anything you've done that has made you more deserving than others. Reflect on that truth as I close in prayer and as we sing together. And as you're reminded of God's unconditional love—portrayed so clearly in the story of The Lost Son—understand God has chosen you as a recipient of his love to share that love with others.