

The lost son

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[0 : 0 0] Turn to the Gospel according to Luke chapter 15. We're looking today at this parable of the partical son. We have over the last three Sabbath mornings been looking at this 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke with its three parables. And we have seen that the three parables are a commentary if you like on the opening verses of the chapter. The Pharisees and the scribes murmured saying, this man receiveth sinners and eateth with them. And I'll just remind you about the position of these scribes and Pharisees. They were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the people of Israel. They were supposed to be the shepherds of the flock. They were supposed to care for men's souls. But far from caring for men's souls, they would not even associate with the publicans and with the sinners. They would have nothing to do with these tax collectors and sinners.

They regarded them as outcasts. And these publicans and sinners knew this, of course. And what a contrast there was between the scribes and the Pharisees and Jesus. Because Jesus was completely different. He mingled with these people. They gathered round the hymn. He ate with them.

He spoke to them. He came down to their level to try and raise them up, to try and help them. And so the contrast we have in attitude between the scribes and Pharisees and Jesus. And this, of course, led the scribes and Pharisees to murmur against Jesus that he was mingling with these tax collectors and sinners. And so they muttered these words, this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. This fellow. And they were saying it in a scornful way. But of course, they were speaking the truth. They were uttering the gospel. For that is the gospel. This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. And so Jesus gives us these three parables in order to show that the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees were wrong. And to show that the true attitude is that which is manifested by himself and by his father. And the whole theme of the chapter is the yearning love of the Godhead for the lost sinner and the joy when the sinner is found. And so we've been looking at these parables and we've been seeing the lostness of the sinner. We've been seeing the activity of God in seeking the sinner. And we've been seeing the rejoicing that takes place once the sinner is found. And so there's one theme throughout the whole chapter. And that is this joy in receiving sinners. And we've also seen that the parables are complementary. In other words, the first parable, the parable of the lost sheep, is speaking about the work of the Son, who is the Holy Spirit, is going out to seek the lost. Out on the hills, out in the mountains, out in the wilderness, to seek the lost sheep. And then the second parable is speaking to us about the work of the church and the work of the Holy Spirit. The woman with the lamp, who is seeking the lost coin, the sinner who is dead in trespasses and sins, is being sought by the church, who has the Holy Spirit as the light.

And so we've looked at the lost sheep and the lost coin. And now we turn today to look at the lost son, the prodigal son. And we'll see how that is symbolic in the same way. And we find first of all that the lost son is symbolic of the lostness of man. The lost son is symbolic of the lost condition of man. Note one of the parables on its own is able to convey to us the complete picture. We saw in the lost sheep that that speaks to us of the lostness of man as a person who has gone astray, who is wandering away from the fold, who is following his own nature, as you might say. He's living for just for the present, for the next pleasure you might say. And therefore he is in a pitiable condition. He's a person who's following his own nature. He's fallen nature. And he's going further and further away from God and from the fold. And he's in a helpless condition therefore, the sinner in the first parable. He's helpless without the shepherd. And then in the second parable we saw the sinner as lost in the sense that he is helpless and lifeless and dead in trespasses and sins. There's no hope of recovering himself. He's like a lost coin. He's helpless to do anything about himself. Man's utter inability to save himself. That's a picture there. Now in this third parable we have another dimension of man's lostness. And that's the fact that man is woefully or rebelliously lost.

And what comes over in this parable is the utter folly of man. The utter folly of man in his sin and in his rebellion. And we see it in this way. When we look at this younger son in the father's house, we see that he had a good father and he had a good home. And that's what comes over in the parable how good this father was. There's no blame attributed to the father whatever. We as parents have our faults and very often these faults in us come out in our children and so on. And there's some blame attached perhaps to us because of the way in which we bring up our children. But there's no blame attached to the father in this parable. He seems to have been a God-fearing man, a righteous man, a considerate man, a caring man, a compassionate man. Everything about him is good. And everything about the home is good.

[6 : 47] There's no fault to be found in the home. And there's every reason to believe that his son had a happy upbringing in a good home. He had every comfort, he had every blessing in his home. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the father. And there's no seem to be anything wrong with the home in which this son was brought up. And then suddenly we read these words, Father give me the portion of goods that falls to me. Father give me the portion of goods that falls to me. No waiting until the father had died when he would inherit the portion. No, it must be now. It must be straight away. I want it now.

And it wasn't a sudden impulse that made him ask for this. No, this defection must have been working in his heart for a long time. And that's what we see here, that everything had sprung from the condition of his heart. There was a defection in his heart. Otherwise there would be no defection from his father's home.

And the defection arose in the heart of this young man. It wasn't in his circumstances, it was in his heart that he went astray. You see, he wanted to be free from obedience.

He wanted to be free from obligation. He said to himself, I want to taste freedom. I want to taste independence. I want to go my own way. I have a right to happiness in my way. And therefore he says, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he takes that portion and he goes away from the father's house and he sets off to the far country. And that is the tragedy and the folly of this young man. The way he treated his father, the cold callous way in which he treated his father. And the problem was really in the fellow's heart. And that is true with a sinner, you see. The trouble with a sinner is not his circumstances, no matter what social workers will tell us, no matter what politicians will tell us, the real problem with man is not his environment, but his heart. He went wrong in his heart and that's where man goes wrong today. The carnal mind is enmity against God. It's not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. And how do we know when someone's mind is enmity against God? Do we need to have them going round shouting, I hate God, I hate God? No. We don't need to hear them saying that, because it's manifested in their life. It's manifested in their life how you treat God. Because God gives you life, God gives you health, God gives you loved ones, He gives you food, He gives you clothing, He gives you work, He gives you many blessings, and you live as if He did not exist. And that's through evidence there is that there's this carnal heart and this carnal mind which is enmity against God. You take the gifts without giving thanks to Him. You spend your time on yourself, you spend your time on the world, you indulge your appetites, you despise His laws, and that's the only evidence you need to know that there's a carnal heart that's at enmity against God. That's where the defection is, that's where it all begins, it begins in this callous way in which the sinner treats God. The cold, calculating way in which we deal with a God who bestows every blessing upon us. That's the evidence that there's enmity in our hearts to God. And what did this young man gain by it all? Well, he gained nothing. He gained nothing. He squandered his substance in wild living. He ate and drank and had a good time and it all came to nothing in the end. He thought he could buy freedom, he thought he could buy satisfaction, he thought he could buy happiness.

And what happened? A severe famine came in that land and he began to be in want. And he went and hired himself to a citizen of that country who sent him into his field to feed pigs. Now some people see in that a reference to the devil, but I think that's reading too much into it. We can't read too much into every detail of our parable. But anyway, this poor fellow had to go off and hire himself for labor to a citizen of the country.

[11 : 53] He sent him into his field to feed pigs and no one gave him anything to eat. He would fain a third his belly with the husks that the swine did eat and no man gave him to him. He was really down and out, really down and out as a consequence of his sin and of his disobedience. But then we read this wonderful thing. When he came to himself, when he came to himself, he said, how many hard servants of my father's have bread and enough bread enough and to spare and I perish with hunger. When he came to his senses his senses. And that's a beautiful picture of what happens when a sinner turns to God. Because you see, what it is saying is this, that as long as a sinner stays away from God, he is beside himself. He is out of his mind.

He is a stark staring bonkers. He is mad. He is deranged. And what he needs to do is to come to himself.

That's what happened with this young man. He came to himself. He came back to his senses. And that's exactly the picture we have of the sinner coming back to God. Away from God. He's living in a world of make-believe.

He's mad. He's deranged. He can't be anything else. Spiritually speaking, he's deranged. He's beside himself. He may be the cleverest person in the world. And yet he's mad because he's living without the God upon whom he's dependent for his breath and his life and everything. And he's trying to make out that he's independent when he's not independent for one moment of his existence. That's a sad case with a sinner. However brilliantly intellectually he may be. However far he may have advanced in this world, in his job, in society, he's really mad in himself. And that's true with regard to the prodigal. And so he came to himself. He began thinking. He began to use his mind.

What a fool I am. And that's where it all started. That's where it all began. Way back home. He came to himself. He came to himself. He came to his senses. What a picture of the sinner. Then secondly, we have the waiting father as symbolic of the father in heaven. All the time the son was away. The father was longing for his return. Every day he could say he would be scanning the horizon for a sight of his son. Never a day passing that he would go out to the top of the house and look along the road to see if the sun was coming back. Never a day passing that there would be some flicker of hope that things would turn out well that day. Well you might say, why did his father not go out seeking the son? Why didn't he not go after him into the far country and see if he could find him? Well you see that's where the complementary nature of these parables come in. Because in this parable the father represents the home base. The place to which the lost returns. But that doesn't mean to say that there is no seeking. No, because you see he has already sent his son to seek the lost. And he has sent his spirit to seek the lost. We saw that in the first parable. The shepherd who goes out to the mountains to find a lost sinner. And the woman who lights the candle to find the lost coin. There's activity in the first two parables. And that's the activity of the Godhead. But here we have the waiting of the Godhead represented by the Father.

[16 : 02] It's the same merciful Father who sent the Son and sent the Spirit. It's the same merciful Father who sent his Son to die and his Spirit to work in the hearts of sinners. But you see here it's the waiting Father.

It's the home base that is spoken about. And the Father is waiting for the Prodigal to return. And he returns. How many he says to himself of my Father's hard servants have bread enough and to spare and I perish with hunger. I will return and say to my Father, Father I have sinned.

You see, that's the first sign of penitence. The first sign of penitence. Father I have sinned. And he's going to lay down some conditions to his Father. He says, make me like one of thine hard servants. I'll lay down some conditions. I haven't got the right to be a son any longer, but at least I'll get back home and I can be a servant and enjoy some of the things that I had before. But you see, when he comes home he finds there is no conditions. The Father is not laying down any conditions.

While he was still a long way off. The Father saw him. He was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son. He threw his arms around him and kissed him. What a picture.

Matthew Henry, that great old commentator. Matthew Henry, that great old commentator, says, here is mercy personified. Eyes of mercy, he saw him. Bowels of mercy, he had compassion. Legs of mercy, he ran. Arms of mercy, he threw his arms around him.

[17 : 52] Lips of mercy, he kissed him. Lips of mercy, he kissed him. Deeds of mercy, bring forth the best robe and put it on him. What a reception. What a picture of the Father receiving the returning sinner. What a picture of mercy. It is mercy from first to last.

Totally undeserved mercy. No conditions laid down. No totally undeserved mercy. The son had been callous. He had been ungrateful. He took what he got.

Give me, give me, was his cry. He wasted what he got. And here he comes home, a sorry, pathetic figure, tattered and smelly, no doubt.

You'd have thought that the Father should at least have ignored him for a while and see if he would come to a better mind than that and see if he would suffer for a while and then the Father might receive him.

But you see, that's where we are so far wrong. God says, my ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts. And God delights in undeserved mercy.

[19 : 09] Undeserved mercy is God's delight. The miserable condition of the sinner is no hindrance to divine love. No, the Father receives him just as he was. Totally undeserved.

But that is the delight of God, to show totally undeserved mercy. But also, it was totally unreserved mercy.

We talk about the prodigal son. But we could also talk about prodigal love. Because that was the kind of love that the Father showed to the son. Prodigal love. It wasn't mere forgiveness.

He might have been content with that. He would have been content with that. He would have been content with the place of a servant. But that was not what the Father did. It wasn't mere forgiveness. It's restored sonship. Bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger. Shoes on his feet. Bring out the fatty calf and kill it. And let us make a feast. And you see, it's the lavishing of love.

[20 : 15] He doesn't stop at mere forgiveness. He lavishes this love upon the son. And surely this is again so characteristic of God.

And where can you see anything to be compared with this? It's only the Bible that reveals this to us. We can't find this in nature. Creation doesn't tell us of such a God.

Only the Bible tells us of such a God. A God of mercy. And a God of unreserved mercy. He lavishes his mercy and his love on the returning sinner.

And then thirdly and finally, we have the feast as symbolic of the rejoicing when the son comes home. What a celebration party!

What rejoicing! What happiness! Eating and drinking. Music, dancing. Great joy in the Father's house when the son comes home.

[21 : 16] And what joy! We have noticed already how the joy seems to increase as the parables go on. One in a hundred sheep. One in ten coins. But one in two sons.

Half the family back. Half the family restored. Unbounded joy in the Father's house. What delight at the son's return.

You can imagine it. The son restored. And there's a great party. There's great celebration. There's great rejoicing. And who can doubt that for any longer?

God's yearning desire to see sinners return. If you aren't convinced by now, you never will be convinced that this God, this Father, is rejoicing in the returning sinner.

It's his delight. It's his pleasure that the sinner should return. And you see, the whole chapter ends where it began. The contrast brought out between the scribes and the Pharisees and Jesus.

[22 : 25] And you see, that's a picture we have of the scribes and Pharisees here in the elder brother. He is the picture before us here of the scribes and Pharisees.

He represents them. He was outwardly moral and righteous. He was in a standing of a legal relationship to God. He was a son by law.

You see, that when the prodigal returns, he shows anger. He shows anger. He was angry and would not go in. And on one level you can sympathize with him.

You have every sympathy with him on a natural level. That he should be angry with the treatment that this younger son received after all he did to the father. But you see, the great lesson from the story is this.

That the older brother failed to understand the nature of grace. Just as the scribes and Pharisees failed to understand the nature of grace. He couldn't understand that God, that his father should deal with his son in this way.

[23 : 34] In the same way that we can't perhaps understand that God should deal in mercy with sinners. That was the great failure on the older brother's part.

You see, we are all sinners and our only hope is mercy. Our only hope is in grace. And we can't stand aloof like the Pharisees did and say, we are better than they.

We can't stand aside and say, there's no need of mercy for us. No, we are saved and saved by mercy alone. And you see, the coming home of the prodigal acted as a kind of catalyst for the older brother, for the elder brother.

You see, this relationship of grace highlighted the fact that this brother was still in a relationship of law. He was still in a relationship of law to the father.

Just as the scribes and Pharisees were. And therefore, they couldn't understand grace. They couldn't understand mercy. They couldn't understand Christ mingling with publicans and sinners.

[24 : 44] And perhaps we are in that condition today. Perhaps we feel that we are righteous in ourselves. Perhaps we feel we don't need mercy. We don't need grace.

We're still related to God, we think, on the basis of merit. Just as the scribes and Pharisees were. But the lesson of this parable and of this chapter is that we're all under the same condemnation.

That there must be said of all men that they need mercy and they need grace. There's only one prayer that can suit all men.

And that is, God be merciful to me, the sinner. God be merciful to me, the sinner. Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight.

That's the sound of the penitent. And if you cannot say that today, then God have mercy on you. Because that's the position that we must all come to if we are going to come to the father's house.

[25 : 50] We must say this, in some measure at least. God be merciful to me, the sinner. If we can't say it out loud, can we not even groan it in our hearts?

Because there's no other way to the father's house. There's no other way to the kingdom. And that's the only way in which God will be rejoicing over you. If you say with all mankind, as all mankind needs to say, God be merciful to me, the sinner.

That's the only way to the father's house. And that's the only way back. Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight. We all need it. There's no longer any relationship of merit.

It's all a relationship of grace. All of grace. Do we understand grace? Or are we like the elder brother who didn't understand grace?

Who stood aside? Who was angry? Or are we like the younger brother who understands that it's all of grace now? No longer of merit.

[26 : 54] No longer our righteousness. But all of grace. From first to last. Well, can we say today, God be merciful to me, the sinner.

Well, if we can say it, the corridors of heaven will resound with rejoicing that one sinner repents. There'll be more rejoicing than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance.

May you cause today the corridors of heaven to rejoice with your groan. God be merciful to me, the sinner. Let us conclude this morning by singing in Psalm 119, singing at verse 57.

Psalm 119, verses 57 to 64, stanzas. Thou my sure portion art alone, which I did choose, O Lord.

I have resolved and said that I would keep thy holy word. With my whole heart I did entreat thy face and favor free. According to thy gracious word, be merciful to me.

[27 : 58] The tunis Belmont. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

A L di■er O Thank you.

[30 : 45] The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with you this day and forevermore. Amen.

Amen.