

EQUIP South Africa 2012

Session 2

The Three Prodigals

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Luke 15

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 “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? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 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.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

8 “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins[a] and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Parable of the Lost Son

11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

13 “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. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs

were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 “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! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 20 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.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “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. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 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.’”

Verse 2 above where it says the Pharisees muttered against Jesus about how Jesus welcomes sinners is the key verse in this text. It’s because of the Pharisees’ questioning and doubt that Jesus tells these stories. If you miss that verse you miss the point of the three stories.

The reality is that the Pharisees struggled with Jesus. Sinners flocked to Jesus but every

time the Pharisees were around Him there was an issue. They thought their good deeds and righteousness should give them good standing with God. They thought Jesus should rather hang out with them than sinners because they were doing what we're all supposed to be doing.

We see similar issues all over the scriptures, and not always just with the Pharisees. In Luke 19, when Jesus hangs out with Zaccheus, they grumbled about how He welcomes sinners. Zaccheus represents to us a political outcast. In Luke 7 they grumble when Jesus talks to a prostitute. She represents a sexual outcast. In John Chapter 4 there are issues about Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. She represents to us a racial outcast.

Wherever Jesus goes he is touching lepers, healing the sick, and every time he does these things the Pharisees are upset, asking questions around why it is Jesus is hanging with the sinners rather than them, the “righteous” leaders.

How the stories link

These three stories illustrate something for us.

- It starts with a lost sheep. Finding a lost sheep speaks to us of great effort.
- It moves to a lost coin. A coin speaks of value.
- Then it talks of lost sons. This story speaks to us of the great love of a great father.

In all three of these stories something is out of position and lost. But the point is that God places value on what is lost. That's the point that Jesus is trying to drive home with the Pharisees. The position of these three people / things doesn't change their value – a lost sheep is still a sheep; a lost son is still a son; a R5 coin is worth R5 even when you lose it.

It's not about your position but it's about your value in God. Someone's position does not determine their value before God. Jesus has to hammer this continually with the Pharisees and they don't get it. R5 in a gutter is still R5! In the eyes of God someone drunk in a gutter is of great value!

If we're going to do what God has called us to do – take this Gospel to the nations – we better understand this point and allow God to adjust our hearts so we comprehend the value He places on what is lost.

A “duh” moment

Let's look at the story of the Prodigal Son. When the younger brother asks for his

inheritance it would have been the ultimate insult to his father at the time. He is basically saying that he cannot wait for his dad to die. He is saying, “Dad, I want from you but I don't want you.” Then not only does he say that but he takes his inheritance and lives as if his father really is dead, going to a far-off country and living as if he has no father.

I love verse 17 where it says he “came to his senses”. He has this 'duh' moment in this distant country in his place of want. And what's interesting about this moment is that his revelation is not in his sin but in the great love of His father.

He's tried to destroy, distort and defile his relationship with his father, but his revelation is that once you are a son you can never be an “un-son”. It's not about his sin. It's not about the fact that he is with the pigs. Being with the pigs is not a good place for a good Jewish boy to be!

In the country he is living in he is lower than a pig – he's not even allowed to eat the food the pigs are eating. That's how the world sees other people that are sinners. But it cannot be like that in the Church. It cannot be that we de-value people because of their position.

The revelation of Isaiah was Christ, just like what was spoken about in Tyrone's message on Isaiah. And so that's where this son is – he gets a revelation that his relationship with his father can be distorted but it can never be destroyed.

Many of us know prodigals. But be encouraged – their relationship with the father can never be destroyed. We are all created in the image of God; we're all sons and daughters of the Most High. We can be in or out of position and God does not value us any differently.

As much as you cry and bleed for those prodigals, the father does even more so. When we pray for our unsaved families we are partnering with God. When we go after the lost we partner with God. We are not twisting His arm to do something He doesn't want to do.

God chooses Father

God in his omniscience could have chosen any title: CEO; boss; but he chose this title 'father' because of the relational implications that go with it. None of those other titles could carry the message that once we are sons and daughters we can not be anything else.

Our Father has put great effort into saving us as he places great value on us because he has great love for us.

- God is eternal and his love will never end.

- He is immutable and his love for us will never change. Think about that.
- He is omnipotent (all powerful) and so his love for us is all powerful.
- He is omniscient (all knowing) and so he loves you and I despite what he knows about us, past present and future. That's good news! The good news just got better!
- He is omnipresent and so His love is everywhere. All the time. And always sufficient for every situation.

This is the son's 'duh' moment. He realises: “Why would I be out here when I can be in my father's house with the love of my father every day?”

That revelation changes him. It changes his language, because when he left it was all about “give me” but when he came back it was all about “make me”.

See when we come to this revelation we're not in it for what God can do it for us. Rather it's now about asking God to do it in us so we can do it in others. We are not meant to just simply be the recipients of God's love but we are meant to be the recipients of His love and then the transportation system of his love to a lost and dying world. Not just *to us* but *in us and through us*.

Long before we see Jesus command us to make disciples we get Jesus saying “follow me and I'll make you fishers of men”. Long before we make other people we need to be made over in the image of God.

The father saw the son coming because he was looking for him and waiting, wondering if this is the day his boy comes home. Then he runs to his son. A few steps towards God and he comes running to us. I've heard it said that it was undignified for a man of that age to run in that culture, but this man has nothing to lose. He isn't worried about his dignity.

The son has a whole speech prepared. He says he has sinned against heaven, and there's a lesson there as our sin is always primarily against heaven. Even if I hurt another human my sin is primarily against God because only He is holy.

I love the response of the Father – “shhh, don't say anything, I'm just happy to have you home.” He cries for them to bring the robe, which speaks of identity; he says bring the sandals – slaves went barefoot, sons wore sandals. He says bring the ring, which speaks of authority to do business on the father's behalf, to go to the town and spend money. So you can see the scandal – this kid who blew his inheritance on prostitutes can now spend money on the father's behalf.

With God we don't need to earn anything. There's no probation period when we come

home, when we come home we come home – we have full sonship and the father loves us and trusts us.

The father in the story calls him “this son of mine” – the reverse revelation of when the son said “my father”. When David says the Lord is “my” shepherd, it would have been different if he had said the Lord is “a” shepherd. There's something beautiful being communicated here – “This son of mine” and “my father.”

The Mexicans have a beautiful way of putting this. When they're talking about their son, they use the word “mi hijo” – a term of incredible endearment and affection. They don't use it for anyone else but their sons. For their daughter it's “mi hija”.

“My father” and “my son” communicates something profound – this relationship can never be destroyed. It can never be non-existent. The son gets that revelation in a pig sty, realising that with his father he doesn't need to get cleaned up. It's at the place of a pig sty that God wants to break that revelation in our lives.

The older brother

The older brother is more of a problem child than the younger one. Despite being busy with his father's affairs, he is alienated from his father and doesn't know or understand him. He is self-righteous – he looks down and judges his brother.

We need to quit judging people who are still in their sin. We think the line for sin is over there and we're on this side with Jesus. Scripture denies that – we're all over the line. Jesus says if you look at a woman with lust in your heart you have committed adultery. We all need a saviour. None of us are righteous enough and this is what Jesus is trying to hammer home. When we get that we understand that we have to stop judging.

You get a puppy to stop peeing on the carpet by rubbing its nose in it, but that's not how you get sinners to give up their sin! You get sinners to quit their sin by pointing at the love of their father not by pointing at their sin. We need to quit that and tell them about a father who loves them, who's gone through great effort to save them because he places great value on them. And let them come to that revelation in the pig sty, that their father loves them and there's no reason for them to be living like this when they can live in their father's house.

It's the kindness and love of God that leads sinners to his repentance. Not judgement. If the older brother had met that son on the way home I dare to say this story might have ended differently. He might have said, “What are you doing here? You've already spent your inheritance.” He might have even lied. “You know what, dad gave up on you years

ago. There's no place here for you. Look what you look like. You can't come to church looking like that.”

The father never gives up on us. Only the older brother points out the younger brother's sin and makes the accusation. The father never does. The older brother says, “this son of yours spent his money on prostitutes. He has been whoring around and now you bring him back home?”

Our father is like that – he never mentions our sin. No, he wants us back home.

The older brother is as far from the father in his heart as the younger brother was geographically. He was unmoved by his father's pain when the younger brother left and stayed silent. Some books say that culturally it was up to the older brother to be the mediator as he would have become the patriarch of the family when the father passed away. But he never related to his father's pain and also never related to his father's joy when the younger son came home.

There are people like that in our day. They've lost the pain of lost people. We've lost the pain and brokenness of that, and when we lose that there's a disconnect between us and the father's heart. When we are not still broken for people that do not know him we've lost that connection with our father. And when we lose the pain we also lose the joy of seeing him come home.

The older brother thought he could earn his father's love and affection by doing all the right things. That's exactly what the Pharisees were doing; they thought their righteousness earned them their position with God, earned them a place with Jesus. We've got to understand that proximity is not relationship. This son was home yet he was far from his father. You can be in church your whole life and still be far from the heart of the father. It's about making a connection with the father's heart every time we're in his presence.

This was bad news for the Pharisees and it's bad news for us if we don't get the heart of the father. He kept the law of his father but he missed the father's heart.

The third son

Here's the good news. There was a third son. The son who is telling the story. He is the central personality and theme of Scripture. He is the perfect son who kept the law of his father but also understood and demonstrated his father's heart perfectly, which is why he could say that if you've seen him you've seen the Father.

The older brother kept the law but didn't understand his father. The third son kept the law

and understood his father's heart. And he speaks on our behalf. He became a prodigal for our sake. Not in disobedience like the younger son, but in loving obedience to his father. He left His father's house to go to a distant country, to a people who despised him, and like the younger son he spent everything – but he spent it on our behalf, even pouring out his life.

The word 'prodigal' means to spend wastefully or recklessly. This prodigal Jesus spent all he had recklessly to ensure our salvation. He yielded profusely to his father's heart for reconciliation between him and his lost sons and daughters.

Where we identify

Some of us identify with the lost sheep – vulnerable and alone.

Some of us identify with the shepherd looking for the lost sheep, out there wondering the hills looking for what is lost.

Some of us identify with that woman in the story with the coin – on our knees, crying and begging and pleading for what's lost to be returned.

Some of us are the younger brother.

Some of us are the older brother. Maybe we've lost the pain of seeing others leave home and the joy of seeing them come home.

But I want to suggest that the person we should most identify with is the third son – this Jesus, this incredible saviour, who in perfection gave everything he had to secure these wonderful things for us. That's who we need to identify with. He understood the Father's heart and we need to understand the Father's all-loving heart.

Mission starts here with this heart attitude – that God loved me long before I loved him. And it was a perfect love and will always be. And because of that I can reach out to others with that same love.

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