

Parables: Ancient Stories for Modern Times

#1 “A Reason to Rejoice” – Luke 15

Matt Cassidy – 3/7/2010

Today, we are starting a four-week series on Parables. These are short little stories that Jesus told to give us, usually, one big punch line about how we should live or what we should believe, the values we should have.

Today, we will look at a parable that focuses on the issue of what causes you to rejoice. What makes your heart sing? What things happen in your life to make you walk on air? Sometimes it is just a promotion at work or a great grade in school. But those are consequences of good work and being industrious in your occupation, being well-trained.

The things I rejoice over are when I win things – and I think that only happened twice in my life – but I was full of joy. One was at a very inappropriate time, if I remember right, but that is another story I will tell you some day.

Sometimes you go back to some school you went to thirty ago and the football team wins and people freak out. That is what happens at our house – especially a couple of years ago when the Longhorns won the national championship. My wife was full of joy. It was an embarrassment to the rest of us. So she took us down to the UT campus where we mixed and mingled with other joy-filled people and my children were wondering, *Oh, it is a cult*. She fit in nicely but the rest of us wondered.

When God talks about joy, when Jesus speaks about rejoicing or having joy, He talks about the thing that causes heaven to rejoice. That is when people who have gone astray and have lived destructive lives, repent and return to come home – all of heaven rejoices. All of heaven celebrates when people are drunk and then get sober, when they come to their senses.

You can get drunk on a lot of things: alcohol, but also on pride, greed, beauty, the kids, errant philosophies. Whatever it is that distorts the way you perceive life, and that perception puts God in second or third place, then you are drunk and you will make decisions that will injure you and injure people around you that you love the most. When you are on that path or someone you love is on that path, and then they see things right and they come to their senses and they return home, that causes great rejoicing in heaven.

What Makes Heaven Rejoice – Luke 15:3-10

Jesus wants to make this a clear lesson for all of us. In Luke 15, He actually tells three stories about what makes heaven rejoice and we will look at them briefly today. One story is about sheep, another about coins, and then a very significant story.

Luke 15:3 Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not 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.’”

That word *rejoice* will be repeated multiple times.

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.

Next story, verse 8.

:8-10 Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not 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.

If you have rejoicing in your heart, Jesus is saying, if you have this value that one person repenting changes your lifestyle, it changes the way you live, it changes who you befriend, it changes your prayer life, it changes the way you pray and who you pray for.

If you lose something, you alter everything in order to find it. You lose a sheep, you put the other 99 where they are safe and you go find the 1.

It alters your conduct and then when you find that thing, you throw a huge party and you want to bring as many people into that rejoicing experience as you can possibly bring.

These first two stories are like trailers to the real movie. They are trivial and incidental. They are trying to tease you about what is really at stake here. One person loses 1% of their flock but they find that 1% and when they return with the sheep, they rejoice. The other person loses 10% of her savings. It is hard for her but when she finds it, she calls her friends in to rejoice.

Sick at Home – Luke 15:11-14

Now we are going to talk about somebody who loses 50% of his children. Verse 11 is the first part of a three-act drama. The first act is “Sick at Home.” The second act is “Home Sick.” The third act is “Home Again.” – This is the first act starting in verse 11.

Luke 15:11-14 Jesus continues: “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.

Let’s look at this briefly.

The younger son goes to his father and says, *I wish you were dead and I am getting impatient with how long that is going to take. I want my inheritance now.* Immediately, there is tremendous disrespect.

But also there is a sense of entitlement that is inappropriate. We don’t deserve an inheritance from our father. There is no obligation to give anything to our children. This son thinks his father is obligated to give him his inheritance and his father is obligated to give the inheritance to his son before he even dies because the son demands it.

This son takes his inheritance and says, *I don’t even like being around you. I will go to a far off country, as far as I can get.* The next thing added there is so that he can squander the wealth that his father worked hard to gain in wild living. Wild living is everything you expect it to be. As disgraceful and unwholesome and dishonorable as this wild living might be, if you have lived that life or you know someone who has, you know this to be true. It is consistent in all of these stories. You hurt those who love you the most when you live this life. You are not in isolation in your decision making. When you make these moral choices and when you think your moral choices are just fine for you, there are ripple consequences for those and those people who love you the most and think most of you and you are endearing in their hearts towards you, they suffer the most. And this son does not care.

In summary, the younger son rejects his father, takes his father’s wealth, moves as far away as he can, and then blows the money in ways that show dishonor and disrespect. You can bet that the father heard about these stories. It just broke the father. It ripped him apart.

Sick at Home – Contemporary Version

When I was studying this passage, I thought that for so many of us it is a familiar story. For many of us in this room, it is a story that we have actually lived. I thought I would introduce you to some friends of mine who have lived out this story. The first person I would like you to meet is Rachel Perez who will come and tell her part of the story. She was the prodigal daughter.

Rachel Perez: Hi. Well, I started out as a typical straight-A, obedient student/child. I got along well with my family. Around seventh or eighth grade, I got really angry and I could not tell you what that anger was caused from but I started acting out. I became extremely disrespectful. My grades were falling and I was acting in extremely inappropriate ways for anyone but especially for a young teenager. Those actions caught up with me and at the age of 15, I became pregnant. Shortly after I turned 16, I had my daughter Kelli.

Matt: In reference to the story being told, how did that affect your sister, Alicia, and your mom and how did you feel about the injuries?

Rachel: To be really honest, I didn't care. I didn't understand why they were angry. This was my life and I was the one who was pregnant. I was the one who had to take care of her. No part of me saw how this affected them at all. I didn't think they had a right to be angry or hurt. I didn't see it.

Matt: It was all about you.

Rachel: It was all about me.

Matt: Another person I want to introduce you to is Rachel's older sister, Alicia. Alicia is going to tell a very similar story but I want you to listen because it is from a different perspective. I want you to listen for the concern that she has for Rachel, the pain that was caused to Rachel's mom and to Alicia. Then I want you to listen especially for and to be clued in on what Alicia does with the sorrow and the burden that she is carrying because of her concern.

[Video of Alicia's part of the story; she attends another church in far south Austin.]

Alicia: In our house, from the time Rachel was in the seventh grade, to the time when my niece was born which was when Rachel was in tenth grade, it was a rough place. She would run away. She would fight with my mom. Mom called the police several times, trying to find her. Rachel was hurting and she was angry but she also had a very hard shell and didn't want to listen. So, I was angry but I also hurt for her because the choices she made had such huge consequences and eventually lifelong consequences. So, in the summer before her tenth grade year, we found out that she was pregnant and I remember my mom just thinking – *What are we going to do?*

I had recently come to Grace Covenant. I wanted a church that was teaching the Word of God. I had been starving on baby food and so I was ready for more. I was so thankful to be here because when all that had been going on, I needed people around to help me, to walk through this with me. I had started going to Bible study and made some really good girlfriends and we started praying for my family and my sister.

My niece was born in March of my senior year. I thought surely this will be a good wake up for her. She is having a baby and she is going to be a mom. But it didn't really change. She continued to make choices that hurt the people around her and hurt herself. I just felt lost and I didn't know what to do for her. The summer I was on college staff, I just came and asked people to please pray for my sister who needed to know the Lord. Everyone gathered around and figured out fun things to help us remember and we prayed. That began a five-year journey of praying for my sister's salvation.

That was in 1997 and continued through my college year. In 2001, I got married to John and he graduated and his job moved us to California.

My sister also got married in 2001 and there were some events that happened in her life that were really tough and hard to hear about but I was in California and I couldn't do anything about it. I had to reach out to my girlfriends and to the friends who loved me and my family who loved the Lord and would go to Him on our behalf. All I could do was hear what was happening and pray, hear what was happening and ask people to pray. It was a really tough year to be so far away and to hear such tough things happening and not being able to do anything – or at least I felt tangibly do anything. I think that is where the Lord showed me that my battle was on my knees for her.

Matt: During these hard times, when Alicia, who was serving as one of our college staff, came to one of our meetings early on, she could not compose herself. She was not very functional. There were a couple of people who had known the story of Rachel but it was not adequate. So that year, everyone on college staff took it on to pray for Rachel.

The *fun things* Alicia talked about were some of the college staff put post-it notes everywhere, all over the house, as a reminder to pray for Rachel. Some people put little dots of nail polish on their watches and whenever they saw that red dot, they would pray for Rachel. The whole team took this burden on.

This was what I wanted you to hear. Alicia delegated the burden. She branched it out. She gave it to other people, to share the load of her wayward sister because she could not bear it. She knew that the primary thing that was necessary for any kind of spiritual transformation in Rachel's life would be God's intervention in her life and though we don't know how this works, the mystery, prayer is part of that. So we appealed to God by praying for Rachel.

Home Sick – Luke 15:13-19

After the first act, "Sick of Home," the second act of the play is entitled "Home Sick." In verse 13, we will see that things get worse and then maybe better.

Luke 15:13 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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

Just a note: When he is out of cash, he is out of friends.

:15 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.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be raised in a committed Jewish home as a young man and then to find yourself herding pigs – unclean animals – and then looking at them and wishing you could eat their slop? It can get that bad. But fortunately for him, that was the bottom. Where is the bottom?

Different people have different thresholds. In verse 17 he comes to his senses. That is the turning point for his life.

:17-19 When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men 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 men.' So he got up and went to his father.

Where did his entitlement go? It is gone, spent. He finally got to that place where there was no more obligation from his father and the young man just wanted to be in the presence of this great man whom he had formerly humiliated and injured.

Home Sick – Contemporary Version

Rachel, you came to your senses.

Rachel: I did. My daughter was born in 1997 and there were a lot of ups and downs after that. But I thought that life was pretty good. If anyone had asked me during that time, I would have said – *Yeah, I am a Christian*. But the reality was that I had no clue who God was. I continued doing things my own way.

The day I turned 18, I was out the door. I didn't think about what that would look like for my daughter, or what it would look like for my own life. I thought it looked pretty good. I was going to be out on my own and free. But things got worse, extremely worse. I gave up a lot of opportunities that were given to me along the way.

At the end of 2000, I met my husband and very quickly we got married in 2001, neither one of us knowing God. The first year of marriage is rough for everyone, they say, and ours came with some very extreme set of circumstances that left us separated for most of that first year. Upon his returning, things were just as bad. There was a lot of anger and a lot of damage we had both done, self inflicted and otherwise, that caused great pain in our marriage and lives and rolled over onto the people around us. But neither one of us – or I – saw it.

October 31, 2002, my daughter was five and we were out trick or treating and we were with her biological father. An argument came up and it was a big argument. There was screaming and yelling and the police were involved. It got uglier. I remember looking around, going – *I can't believe this is happening*. But it was not until I was holding my daughter's hand and I looked down into her eyes and I saw fear. Fear in a five year old's eyes, I cannot describe what that did to me. That was my rock bottom. That was it for me. The next day, I knew what I needed to do. I knew I needed God and I knew who to call. My sister at this time was in Boston. That is who I needed to call, my sister.

Matt: What were you expecting from that call? I can tell you that you had given nothing but ugly to her.

Rachel: Oh yeah, extremely. I had run over her. I was extremely nasty to her. I pushed her away and stomped on her for the last five plus years.

I didn't know what that phone call was going to look like. I knew I had a lot to be sorry for but I knew that she knew God. I needed to pick up that phone and whatever she was going to say, I am going to have to listen to it and hold on to that phone and not hang up. But I did not expect it to be pretty.

Matt: Well, here is Alicia's point of view on that phone call. Again, I want you to be attentive to her attitude towards Rachel, her rejoicing, her celebration, the advise she gives Rachel. That is very important. The last thing and it is streaming through all the things she is saying, but I want you to hear how big her view of God is. The most important thing about us is our view of God. I want you to hear that in Alicia's perspective on this entire event as it rolls out because it is great.

Alicia: So at the end of 2001, my sister and her husband had some difficulty within their marriage. It escalated from there. It would be one event after another, happening with a friend or with Kelli's dad. It was October, Halloween night, that it hit her. There was a big argument with Kelli's father and she looked down and saw fear in Kelli's eyes. That was the night.

Over the next couple of days, she called me and I talked to her. I just remember saying – *Rachel, only He can change this. He is the only thing that is going to change what is going on in your life.* – I would e-mail her verses asking her – *Have you looked at this? Have you done this?* – So we kind of communicated back and forth.

I was actually in Boston at that time in 2002. I was still in that same place of not being tangibly, physically present. It was neat to hear that the prayers were answered and that she knew the Lord, that she had come to know Him. I wasn't there to help her and sit with her and go through the Bible with her over coffee or brunch or whatever. I said – *You need to go and find a church that teaches the Word. You need to be surrounded by people who love the Lord and who love you.* I said – *Go to Grace. There are lots of people who have been praying for you for years.* Within a couple of weeks, in mid-November, she was starting at Grace.

Little did we know all that was in store for her life and our lives. I just praise Him that He brought her to Himself. She knows Him and was known by Him at that time because of how she responded was not of herself. I am blown away when I look back at all that He has brought her through and how He pursued her and loved her that much, never giving up on her, constantly her turning her back and being angry, and He never did. He called His children to pray for her.

Matt: It is a good story.

Home Again – Luke 15:20-24

Luke 15:20- 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.

Rejoicing consumes your every activity. Your physicality is influenced by your joy.

In verse 21, the son starts his lines.

: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.’

The father cannot even hear it because he is too busy rejoicing.

: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. 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.

Home Again – Contemporary Version

In Rachel’s story, it is a lot like that. So many wonderful things happened in their lives. Rachel, come back and tell us a little about that. It is a really long story because it just keeps getting better and better. We don’t have time for most of it.

Rachel: I had to pick up the phone and that was really hard. I was really nervous. I didn’t know what to expect. All of my expectations of what it was going to come to did not go how I thought it would. She said *Hello* and I started crying and telling my story of what had happened, and how I am done and I want God. I am waiting for this big ... I don’t know. She comes back and says – and she is crying – *God loves you. You need God. He can change all of this. He can make this new.* – It was beyond anything I ever expected. I even remember at one point saying – *It is real. It is really real this time.* – Because I didn’t want her to doubt me. With love and compassion, she said – *I know.* We prayed together and we cried together.

She says she e-mailed me. Well, my e-mails were overflowing with love and Scripture and compassion and joy. I mean, multiple e-mails per day. The phone calls that followed were not once a day but two or three times a day. She was calling and checking up on me.

About mid-November is when she said – *You know, you have got to get fed by other people. Try Grace.* – I walked through the doors and what I did not expect was for people to come up to me and say – *Oh my gosh, we have been praying for you for so long.* It was just a joy that I cannot explain.

I didn't know it then but in December I found out that I was pregnant with our son and in April we would find out he was going to have some extreme medical conditions, life threatening, life long. I can tell you that I would not be standing here sharing this story had I not found God before that happened. He carried us through and is still carrying us through those moments. It has been amazing.

Matt: There is a ripple effect to God's redemption in your life and in your family. I will let Alicia tell you about that. It is really fun.

Alicia: Two weeks ago, my mom, sister and I were sitting at the Women's Retreat for the second year in a row. I took a deep breath and had to thank Him that He has changed my family's legacy. He has done great things and that generations to come in our family are never going to be the same because we know Him and we are known by Him. He has allowed me to think of all that He has done.

Matt: Generations to come is the power of God's influence and leaving an entirely different legacy when I think of the legacy that could have been left and now He has redeemed the years of the locust for you guys.

Alicia and John moved to south Austin and now they go to First Evangelical Free Church. They could not be here today because they are very involved in that church. You guys know what a great church that is. So for the last two years, the three of you: your mom and Alicia and you have gone to our women's retreat to have a girls' weekend away. How is that?

Rachel: It is unbelievable. You cannot put it into words. It is a joy I never thought I would get to experience. Having my husband stand behind me and push me to go and make ways for me to go and to get to share that with my kids who are here and they are being fed. It is beautiful.

Matt: It is fun to see your daughter get on the bus for the youth retreat a couple of weeks ago. She went to camp last summer.

Rachel: She has been going to camp. She started here in kindergarten and to see her grow in the Lord and love the Lord and turning 13 this month, I just feel abundantly blessed.

Matt: Thank you, Rachel. It is a great story.

--

Suddenly the trailer seems to be at least inadequate and petty, doesn't it?

Somebody wants to go to lunch with you and they sit down and tell you that they lost one of their children to again this addiction to greed or beauty or some kind of drug.

You say – Yeah, you know I can relate to that because I used to breed cats and one time one of the little kittens got away and I left the 99 in their cages and I went and found that one kitten and when I did, boy, I rejoiced. Then just last October, I lost 10% of my savings because of the stock market dropping and I was wringing my hands and I did not know what to do. Then I left it in their long enough and made some adjustments to where I am back at even. I just called everyone and said – Guess what! My savings are back to equal to where they had been before the stock crash.

The person across the lunch table says - *You just don't understand, do you.*

How many nights can you stay up without sleep, waiting for headlights to pull in to your driveway? Ask somebody whose kids are wandering and are off the beaten path. How many days can you go without food and not even remember to eat? Just ask a mom or dad or someone who loves another human being who has gone off into wild philosophies or just crazy ways of living.

That is what the heart of God is like. When any one of His children has gone astray or one of His elect has not chosen Him yet.

What Can You Do Now?

So, what do you do about that? You can do what Alicia did. You delegate and let other people share that load with you. You pray because in a lot of ways that is certainly the most important thing you can do, and sometimes it is the only thing you can do.

Here at Grace Covenant Church one of our core values is that we meet every single week for the purpose of the family. We get together and we love sharing our experiences with one another. We love

enjoying one another's presence. That is what we do each week. We think church is for the followers of Christ. We get together and we want to learn how to obey all that Christ has commanded for us to do. That is what the great commission says and so that is what we teach.

One of the other things that we do here is meet every week to be equipped, to be trained in how to do ministry in the places where we can influence people. These are strong beliefs that we have here. We read passages from the Bible and we think that is what the church's purpose is, to meet to gather, to enjoy each other, to learn how to obey and to be equipped to send people out to do ministry.

But at least four times a year and especially two times a year where the family of Grace has visitors – big time – visitors are coming. Christmas Eve and Resurrection Sunday are those two big Sundays. We are praying that when visitors come, just like family, we are ready for them.

In our little family, we had a big coming home for a lot of family members and they came to our house. All kinds of friends came over to fix up my house and clean it up. Some of them even provided food for all of us because we could not feed everyone. We parked on the street so that our guests could park in our driveway. We went through the buffet line last to make sure our guests were filled and had more than enough to eat. We just made it a very special time for them.

We do that on Resurrection Sunday. We are just four weeks away from Resurrection Sunday here. We want us all to be bracing and preparing ourselves for that day because guests are coming. We are going to change the way we do things around us a little bit. Our service is going to be fun and I will be presenting the Gospel as though no one in the audience has ever heard it. We will talk about innocence lost and paradise lost and how it can be found in this life, only through Jesus Christ, how we can get our innocence back. I will preach and ask people to make a choice about who they are going to trust for the penalty of their sins. We will explain the Gospel and expect an answer of some kind, one way or the other.

But do you know what you and I can do? We can do what Alicia did when her heart was grieving. We can pray for our friends to come. We can ask other people to pray for our friends to come. We can answer other people's prayers. We get to do that.

Take out your bulletin. Your assignment for today is to tear out the perforated part of the bulletin. It is divided into a top and bottom. We are not sure how people end up opening our doors here at Grace. We just think it is in many respects magic, an answer to prayers to God. So the top part of this tear out reads “_____ has a reason to rejoice.” We would like you to fill in your name there. Then put five names on this paper that we are going to be praying for.

We are going to pray that they would hear the Gospel clearly on Resurrection Sunday and they would respond to it. They would come to their senses somehow between now and then, whether it is at the bottom of some pit or at some peak in their experience where they get everything they ever wanted and they realize that there is nothing in this world that can fill those kinds of needs. They have an eternal need that only God can fill.

I am going to give this card to a friend of mine. I want him to remember these are my five names because he might get three or four of these cards. Matt wants me to pray for these five people.

The bottom of the tear off, “The reasons I will be rejoicing” those same five names will be listed. We ask everyone in the church to pray for the next four weeks to pray for their own list of five people and for the list of another person and their five people, five times a week for the next four weeks. That is what we are going to do. We are going to ask God to answer these prayers to bring people to that place where they come to their senses. We are asking you to share the load of other people’s concerns about people you don’t even know, so that you can lift these people’s faces, names, and souls to the very throne of Christ and He can work with them.

Right now we are going to take a moment of silence and ask God’s Spirit to bring to your mind the faces of five people you will list on both the top and bottom portion of the tear off. Then He would bring to your mind the name of someone in our church to give your top portion to. You can do that in your adult communities. We will be doing a version of this again next week, and for the next four weeks together as a church and we will expect great things.

Let’s ask God to visit our minds right now.

Lord, while this story of Rachel and her wandering, her coming to her senses and ultimately her redemption, and now the rippling effect of your love and mercy on her life, and how it spilled into her extended family, her children, is wonderful. We want to be part of more of those stories.

Lord, we are asking right now that your Spirit would commune with our spirit and You give us the faces of five people You have in your strength and in your plan arranged for us to know in time and space right now. That we would feel the burden that You have for them, that these are the people that are around us that You have grieved over. You want these people to be found and You want us to be part of that finding process so that we can be part of the rejoicing as well. Let us follow your Spirit’s lead in how to fill out these lists.

Lord, now give us the strength and the discipline, the reminders or whatever we need to do in remembrance of praying for these people with hope, that You will arrange circumstances so that they

might hit that place in their lives, that lowest low or that highest peak that still leaves people wanting. Let us be the voice that invites them to church. Let us have conversations that lead that way. Those of us who are kind of fearful or intimidated, if You could help them initiate that conversation, that would be great. God, let us be part of the sorrow that You feel. Help us experience that. Let us be part of the rejoicing that is experienced in heaven when just one of these people repents and returns home. We are so grateful to be part of a wonderful church that opens its arms and greets these people with love and not judgment, with hope and not fatalism – but embracing them with everything You have for them – if they just choose to follow You.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen