

The Parables: #2 “Watch It Again”

Matt Cassidy – 3/14/2010

Luke 15

Good morning. Don't we have an enormous amount of talent up here on the stage during worship. Troy is one of our pianists and he is just spell binding in what he can do.

I want to remind you if you came in late about the tear off in your bulletin. You can write the names of five people on that tear off that would cause you to rejoice if they were to show up on Easter and maybe receive the message of salvation that comes through Jesus Christ alone. You can give this to someone else to pray alone with you so you don't have to feel you are doing it single-handedly. Like it was said before, we are just doing the easy stuff. We are being used by God to do simple things to make relationships with people and have a great time by inviting them to a worship service with us on resurrection Sunday.

Overview of last week's sermon from The Prodigal Son

I wanted to spend more time on last week's story. We looked at what is usually called “The Prodigal Son” parable. There is so much more to tell from this story so we are going to spend another week on it. There is a whole other layer deeper, actually the real point of the story wasn't even discussed last week. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 15 where you will find the parable of The Prodigal Son.

Shepherd & Lost Sheep

If you remember, it starts off with Jesus telling the story of a shepherd who has a rather large flock of 100 but when he was putting them to bed, he did his head count and realized one of those sheep was missing. Because of his enormous love for each of his sheep [he knew them by name], it changed his entire life style. It changed what he was going to be doing that night. So he spent the night looking for that sheep because it was defenseless. What are the defenses a sheep has against the lion or against anything really... but cuteness, isn't that all they have? I don't think that works with the wild kingdom so much. So the shepherd goes out at night and hopes to find that sheep. When he does find that sheep, he is overwhelmed with joy, puts that sheep on his shoulder and walks back.

He is so consumed by joy that he needs to bring other people in on that celebration. So he invites all his shepherd friends to join him and, sure enough, they had a great party that night.

Woman & Lost Coin

The next story rolls out a lot like the first one did. It talked about a woman who lost 1/10th of her savings. She had a great fondness for each of her ten silver coins. She had lost one of those. Because of her need for that coin and her love for the possibility of a certain amount of stability as she retires, it changed her lifestyle. What she had been going to do that day or week, the loss changed everything. She started tearing her house upside down. She looked in every closet, behind every door, in purses she had not used in years. Then one day, she put her face to the ground and looked underneath some vanity or some television set and she finds that one lost coin.

Again, because she is consumed with the joy of finding that lost coin, she brings all of her friends in on it and they have a great party.

Father & Lost Son

That joy that each of these people experience, the shepherd who thought his sheep was dead, and the woman who thought her coin was lost forever, is nothing like a father who has lost a son.

This is a son, the younger son in the story, who has come to his father and said – *You know, dad, I want all that is coming to me.* [As though he deserved it – he is taking his father for granted.] *I want all that is coming to me, now because I want to express my freedom in every way that I can.*

The purpose of freedom is to show that you can choose wisely – not to choose poorly - but that does not matter to this boy. So he sells everything he has in his room, every thing that his father and mother had given to him. He goes to Los Angeles or New York or one of these cities that are rather notorious for chewing up people. That is what happened to this younger son. It chewed him up and spit him out.

Meanwhile, the parents back home, every time the phone rings, they go running because this could be the call. Every time the mail comes, they are out there looking for a hand written note. *No, all we got today was a paycheck, honey. We didn't get what we were really looking for.*

So, the weeks go by, the months go by, or maybe a year goes by. The dad is out in the front yard all by himself like he always is at night, staring at the moon. Then he sees a silhouette coming of a very skinny man. It has just been a year but, goodness, has that boy aged. The father just runs, screaming to his wife who is inside the house. *He is home!* They hug the boy. The son has this speech that has been practiced on the long journey home. *Look, mom, dad. I don't want to bother you guys. I just need a place to stay and then I will be out of your hair. I ran out of places to go.* The father and mother say – *What! What are you talking about?* The mom says – *Look at the way he is dressed!* Dad says – *Let's get him a*

whole new suit tomorrow and get him some shoes too. We will do that. Son, what happened to that ring we gave you, the family crest ring? You sold it? That is okay. You can wear mine until I get another one. Your room, we left it the way you left it. We will fill it up full of new furniture now. We are going to have a great time.

These two parents are so consumed by that joy that they had to invite the whole neighborhood, as though the neighbors didn't know already from the scene that took place in the middle of the street.

That is what joy looks like and that is the way Jesus told those stories. After He told those three stories, He should have just sat down. When you end well, you just sit down and don't try for something more. Don't get greedy here, Jesus. People love a story that ends happily ever after. This one ended happily ever after but then Jesus adds verse 25.

Luke 15:25 Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

Meanwhile the older son was in the field. Who cares?

The Other Story

There is another story and it goes deeper. It is like there are two stories for two different audiences.

You have experienced this when you go see Disney movies, which do this. You have seen this with your children or maybe when you were younger. You watch "Mary Poppins" and while people are singing about chimney sweeping and young people are having a fun time, the parents are getting pinned to the back of their chairs with the message that is sent to them. *Do not neglect your children. Don't get caught up in other causes or work so much that you miss your kids.* – Oh, wow, never saw that as a kid but you will see it as an adult.

"Finding Nemo" – everybody is singing along – "Just keep swimming, just keep swimming." But there is a whole parental lecture happening during that movie. While everybody else is laughing, the parents are hearing the sermon on – *If you are consumed with fear as a parent, you will lose your child. So relax and have fun and enjoy the day-to-day stuff.*

Jesus is telling a story just like that. Do you know how to find the meaning or purpose of a parable? You look for what the circumstances are or what the situation was that brought the story about. In other words, in some of your Bibles, Jesus' words are in red letters, if you go to the black letters just preceding the red letters of the story, you will find out *why* Jesus found Himself in need of telling the story in the first place.

In the case of our story, The Prodigal Son, we just turn to Luke 15:1, 2 and this is what causes Jesus to tell the story He is telling.

Luke 15:1, 2 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Him. 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: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep ...

What is Jesus doing? He is having a great time with tax collectors and sinners and people who are away from God’s kingdom. They are not close to what God is doing. Jesus is altering His lifestyle to be with them, the lifestyle of a traditional religious teacher, to be around them, to have fun with them. What is motivating Him to be so jovial and entertaining and enjoyable? What is the motive? He is living for the hope of the joy that will follow if one of these lost ones is found, if one of these dead becomes alive. He is willing to do daring things and ruin a reputation of what a good teacher should do for the potential of having rejoicing take place – not in His life alone but in the lives of all those who inhabit heaven. Because He lives that rogue way, He tells this story to explain himself.

After He tells the three stories we have been through, it changes and focuses the attention now on the religious leaders who caused Him to tell these stories in the first place. First I will remind you what happens in verses 22-24 and then verse 25 tells this next story.

Luke 15:22-24 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.

Then it changes.

: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.’

:28 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!’

:31 ‘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.’

If your heart is right with God, you will change your lifestyle to be part of the potential of seeing this sort of rejoicing takes place.

The second thing that happens to you is that you celebrate when the lost are found, when the dead are raised again. That is what happens when your heart is right with God. You have changed your lifestyle to reflect that, like Jesus, and you start hanging around people like sinners and tax collectors. When one of them repents, you are joyous about that.

Look at verses 26 and 27 and you will see in these two sentences that a bur is underneath the hard heart of this older brother.

:26 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 has a very bitter heart and we will see why in just a few minutes. But these things, the return of the younger son and the fact that the father is throwing a party, are the very things that demonstrates that the older son has an illness. He is only going to get bitter. If you can imagine this older son day after day with the younger son sitting at the table again.

His attitude toward the younger son has been and has always been that he made his bed with the harlots so let him die in it. The older son’s heart was never in sync with the father. He never understood why the father was so worried about the younger son or cared. The younger had made his choices so it was time that he lived with his choices and that is all here is to it.

The Second Shaming of the Father

The older is shaming his father like the younger son did earlier. Look at verse 28. I will have to give you some background but you will see that he puts his father to shame.

Luke 15:28 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

Let me tell you how difficult this is culturally that we might not fully appreciate.

In the ancient Near East, when a family threw a big party, it was the eldest son’s job to be the host of that party so as to free up the responsibilities of the father and mother. The eldest son would go around

and make sure everybody's drinks were filled, everybody had food on their plates, and were having a good time. The eldest was in charge of orchestrating the servants and making sure that all went well.

The oldest son staying outside, not coming in, is a social flash. The fact that he is staying outside and not going in requires the father to do what? The father has to go outside and plead with the eldest son. If you can imagine the level of embarrassment and I bet you can. In our house there are Grade B insurgencies or rebellion against parents where you just do what you do. But there is Grade A rebellion when you do what you do *when company is over*. You know what I am talking about.

This big house of the father is filled with guests, neighbors, friends and family members. Everyone knows that the older son is outside and has no intention of coming in. The father has to go out again. The father doesn't just send someone out to say – *Look, if you know what is good for you, you come in here and put on a good face and then we can talk about this some other time*.

That is not what happens. It says that two things happen. The father goes out and he pleads with him. This is the second time the father will show his love by humiliating himself. It is undignified for an older man to run in the culture then and it is not far from that even today. But when we talked about the younger son returning, when the father saw him, it reads – the father ran to him. It was a scandal in the community that the father would do that, show himself subservient. In other words, the greater approaches the lesser. In this case, the father's love blinded him and he humiliated himself and ran to the son.

Just a few days later and a verse later, the father is doing it again, in front of everyone in the community that he is having the party with. The father goes out and he *pleads* with a rebellious son. Love does that, you know. It will humiliate you. It will have you change your lifestyle for the things that you love.

In the first story, the presence of the father going out to meet the returning son melted the younger son. In this case, not so much.

Older Son Insults His Father

The older son insults his father by speaking.

Luke 15:29 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.'

By the way, this is the only person in this story who does not call the Father 'father'. It is interesting. The older son says, 'Look!' - not *father*, just Look.

He is insulting his father by not just saying 'Look' but he is saying – *You are not fair*. – Self-righteous people usually claim injustice. They want fair. They want justice to prevail here. Never mind the fact that as the older brother he will receive 2/3 of the inheritance. That doesn't seem all that fair but that is what will happen.

The older son never got so much as a goat and now they are slaughtering the fattened calf for the younger brother.

But I want you to look more carefully at the relationship that this older son has with the father. It was not reciprocal but here is what he is claiming when he is arguing with his father. He says – *Look! I have obeyed everything. I have slaved for you all these many years*. – **He is in a duty-driven relationship with the father**. He has been marching in order for his whole life. This is not a love relationship with the son. The son is looking at this like – *Look, you do this and I do that and then I will get what is coming*. Dad is just an employer. He is just someone that the older son checks in with. He does his duties and then leaves. These 'slaving' and these 'commands' and these sorts of things is not the relationship that the father was hoping to have with the son but that is the way the son responded.

That is the way the Pharisees looked at their religious life by the way – as a set of rules that they just follow. Then God would be obliged to repay them.

What is most important here is that the heart of the older son is magnified and now we get a clear view of the son's heart when we see in verse 30 that **he does not love the things that the father loves**. That is the last bit of evidence that we will need to prove that he is not right with his father.

Luke 15:30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

Not 'brother of mine' but 'this son of yours.' This son is cutting himself off from his father's love because he does not love what the father loves. See, just like the shepherd and the woman, the father is consumed with joy because of his love for that sheep, because of her love for that coin, for the love of that child. This son is saying 'this son of yours' has no place in my heart. That is the same as saying 'nor do you.'

Celebration is Missing

Look what happens in the stories. This is the deeper meaning of these three stories.

In the first story of the lost sheep, there was a huge celebration and everyone who loved the shepherd participated.

In the second story of the lost coin, everyone who loved that woman celebrated.

In the third story, there was a son who was lost and a son who was dead and then he was alive again. Everyone who loved the father celebrated with him. The older son was not there because he did not love what the father loved. He didn't care about what the father cared about.

Do you see the beauty of this story? The sheep got lost by running to a far off country. That is how one brother was lost. Another brother was lost without ever leaving the house – like a woman losing a coin. You don't have to leave or go very far to be just as lost as a younger brother who went to a far off land. That is why the two stories precede this one. He is saying that there are two prodigal sons – one that went away and one that stayed here.

How does that happen? How does a person who stays here get so lost? How does the older brother's syndrome happen to you and to me? How do we slip into that if we are raised in a Christian family and we go to a great church? How does a person do that or a family become like that or how does a church become like that? It is not the theology, I will tell you that. The theology is right but just keep in mind that the theology of the people who crucified Christ, their theology was spot on. It was how they applied it that was wrong. Their hearts were desperately wicked. So it is more than that.

John Stott is a famous Christian author and scholar, and he has also pastored churches on university campuses. He saw this phenomena take place that leads to this older brother syndrome. He calls it Rabbit Hole Christians.

You know – the kind who pops his head out of the hole, leaves his Christian roommate in the morning, and scurries to class, only to frantically each for a Christian to sit next to (an odd way to approach a mission field.) Thus he proceeds from class to class. When dinner time comes, he sits with all the Christians in his dorm at one huge table and thinks, "What a witness!" From there he goes to his all-Christian Bible study, and he might even catch a prayer meeting where the Christians pray for the nonbelievers on his floor. (But what luck that he was able to live on the floor with seventeen Christians.) Then at night he scurries back to his Christian roommate. Safe. He made it through the day and his only contacts with the world were those mad, brave dashes to and from Christian activities.

That is what was happening in these Pharisees' lives. They never get out or fall in love with the lost sheep or the lost coin. So when one of these things is found, there is no reason to celebrate because there was no care in the first place. They have a hard heart toward things that God loves. Because of that, they cannot care about the things that God cares about.

If you love what God loves, two things will happen. You will alter your lifestyle so that maybe someone will accuse you of having a great time with the wrong kind of people. Two, when one of those people finds their way to Christ, you will be the one who is the loudest and screaming. You will be celebrating like no others.

The Pharisees never loved the coin; they never loved the sheep; and they never loved the son. But if you do, you will have something to prove it.

Three Diagnostic Questions

Here are some diagnostic questions to see if you have the syndrome that the older brother had. These might help you find if you are healthy or ill.

First, who are your friends? Do you have friends that would be considered tax collectors and sinners, people who are far away from God, people who don't know His goodness and His strength and His power and sovereignty and these attributes? Are they friends of yours and who you sincerely care about, people you pray for on a regular basis? Do the children in your house, if you are a parent, have close friends who do not attend church who are not close to God?

If the answer is 'yes' then you are in the right place. If the answer is 'no', then you have to reach for just a relative to put on that card. You are almost probably in that category like the older brother.

Second, how is your life style altered for others? Clearly lifestyles are altered in these stories. The shepherd is looking and the woman is looking. This father is also looking. The whole thing got started because Jesus' lifestyle was such that He was hosting parties for people who were outside the religious fringe. Do you do that? Do you have parties for your neighbors over at your house? Do you have gatherings with friends after work and do you go to those events? Do you have a good time, without sinning you can do that? Are you part of other people's lives and are they part of your life? Do you host these kinds of things because Jesus did? He was there with them and His social life was part of their social life and everybody felt good about that.

Third, what makes you rejoice? Is it a great thing that someone came to the youth group who has a background that is rough and shady or maybe a teen who is pregnant? Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Are you happy when someone at work is turning over a new leaf and has been promoted around you but you are happy because they have changed their whole lifestyle because they have surrendered their life to Christ? What you rejoice over is an indication of what you value. If you value the right things then you celebrate the right things.

Two Endings

It is interesting that this is one of two stories in the Bible that does not have an ending. It just ends with the father saying in verse 31:

‘My son’

And by the way, this is a most tender-hearted address.

Luke 15: ‘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 [like dead sheep]

and is alive again; he was lost

[like the lost coin]

and is found.’

But the story does not say what the older son does with that. Does his heart melt like the younger son? Or does he stay rigid? He could do that. He could just stay tough, stay outside, miss the whole party, and he would get worse and worse, wouldn’t he, with every meal that he had to share with the younger brother. It would embitter him still the more.

Or this, and listen to how this other story ends. It is an American story. It is happily ever after. What if the son realized that he has erased the joy in his father’s eyes during this celebration and the son sighs and says, ‘Dad, what was I thinking? I am so sorry. My lifestyle did not change one bit that whole time my brother was gone. I could have changed everything and delegated all my jobs here. That would have been easy. I could have gone out looking for him and I could have looked in every hotel. I could have looked in rat-infested places with roaches crawling on the walls and I would keep searching and I would write you back until I found him. If I had found that little brother of mine, I would wake him up and tell him, “Dad is not mad at you. Come home with us! We want you back. Come on back.” Then he would grab that younger son and walk him back home. You would have seen us on the horizon, not just him. You would have hugged us, not just him. I took all of that away from you because my heart was about me and my righteousness and “that kid will get his.”

But listen, I cannot get back what I could have done. I did not alter my lifestyle but I can celebrate with you, dad. I can celebrate with you. What is left of the inheritance, I will split it with him. I will go in there and work that party. If you want, I will ring the glass and give the toast and I will tell everybody what a scoundrel I have been because I was lost and now I am found and I never left home.

The humiliation of a loving father could have cracked his hard-hearted guy. That is a great story.

Let us let that ending apply to our lives today. Let's pray to that end.

Lord,

I confess that I am lost and I need to be found. There are so many moments where You have been celebrating and I have been sitting on the side with my arms folded.

I want to make great friendships with people outside the faith who I can really get to know deeply and fall in love with so that they can keep me up at night being worried about the condition of their soul. They are just wiggling and fighting in the barbed wire of life and I need to know about that.

I can identify with this older brother and I want my lifestyle to change. Without ever sinning, I want to go and be friends with people which would cause a scandal. I want to pursue the people You call me to pursue and bring my friends in on the burden that would be carried by me, that they would pray for my friends as well

Lord, give me the heart that throws a celebration, that parties, that is full of warmth and joy when dead people are made alive and lost people are found again.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ in hopes of every single person who is antagonistic to you will be brought back by our love and our humiliation before You and even before them. Let us be that bold in our love for others. We pray this with great expectation, in Jesus' name. Amen