

September 1, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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THE LOST SON FOUND Luke 15:11-24

Last week we were introduced to two of three stories that Jesus told in the context of sinners and tax collectors gathering around Him to listen to His teaching. While the notorious sinners gathered to hear Jesus, the secret sinners, the scribes and Pharisees, watched Him and grumbled about how He welcomed these sinners.

In that setting, Jesus told three stories about lost things that were found. The thrust of the stories was to reveal how God welcomes the lost sinners who come to Him and how all heaven rejoices when a sinner repents. Phil Ryken observed, “The three stories go together. Hearing them is like hearing the same melody played on three different musical instruments: it is all the same music, but each story has its own unique sound.” (Philip Graham Ryken, *Reformed Expositor’s Commentary*, Luke, vol. 2, Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2009, 127).

And what a wonderful song the stories play. Here, in the story about two contrasting sons, we are almost overwhelmed by the amazing transformation of a rebel who was only concerned for his own desires. But, being brought to the end of himself by God-ordained circumstances, he humbled himself and repented of his sin. He stands in vivid contrast to his older brother who was quite sure he was righteous and, therefore, in no need of humility, repentance, and forgiveness. We will study that part of the story next week.

The rebel son was not like the sheep that was lost because it wandered off. Nor was he like the coin that was lost when the owner inadvertently dropped it. The son was lost because he wanted to be lost. He chose to be lost. He planned to be lost. How well does this

rebellious son picture what we were as sinners by nature, and the attitude we still fight even as God’s children?

A Rebel At Heart (vv.11-16).

The Prodigal son demonstrates well how rebellion causes sinners to act foolishly (vv.11-12). His rebellion became very clear when the son demanded his fair share. *And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’”* (vv.11-12a). This request is a vivid picture of our natural sinful condition at birth, and developed throughout life. We, like the rebel, are naturally proud and, therefore, self-willed. Our inborn lust and unrighteous desires are demonstrated in any number of vices.

The sad reality is that only the few recipients of God’s grace realize the depth of our natural depravity. The world, on the other hand, thinks that passions and desires are good, normal, and should be pursued. The unredeemed, fallen people of the world system encourage us to chase the passions of our flesh in order to fulfill them. They conclude that unfulfilled lusts are not good for us psychologically. They don’t understand, regardless of how often they are faced with the truth, that fulfilling fleshly passions never brings lasting satisfaction. Their hearts deceive them.

What can a sinner do in such a deceived condition. He or she would do well to pray for God’s gracious enlightenment of your true condition. “The worst ignorance in the world is to not know ourselves.” (J.C. Ryle) Maybe it is chosen ignorance because when God truly reveals our wretched condition, in contrast with His perfect righteousness, we will loath ourselves. When God is gracious to us, we will see ourselves as we are and beg Him to change us.

In the story, this proud and self-centered son wanted his father’s gift but disdained his father who was the author of the gift. He was as proud and self-centered like all of us sinners are. He rebelled against God-ordained authority because he was in rebellion against God. He loved himself which required him to disdain his Creator and rightful Master.

This is not just a picture of what we are by nature – rebellious sinners against our Creator, but a picture of what we always must

fight – the desire to have God’s gifts and provisions without allowing God to govern our lives. Our natural bent is to walk away from God’s oversight so that we can enjoy His benefits according to our passions and desires.

We are surprised (or should be) to discover in the story that the rebel’s father complied with his son’s request. *And he divided his property between them (v.12b)*. That the father granted the rebel’s wishes would have been astonishing to the Jews. In the first place, the proper and self-righteous Pharisees would have been shocked that a son would show such disrespect for a parent and break God’s law about honoring his parents. Furthermore, for the father to concede to such demands was unacceptable.

Let’s stop to consider what the father did here. He divided his property. That is not just money. He divided up all that he had inherited, all that his forefathers had worked for and handed down to him. That would include all land, houses, vineyards, flocks, herds, and actual money. According to the law, he would have divided it by assigning two thirds of the property to the eldest son and assigning one third of the property to this rebel.

Technically, it meant that the property was divided and essentially owned by the heir. However, the heir could not possess the property until the father died. This would be like me saying to one of my sons, “This table saw is yours when I am gone.” My son knows that, according to my word, the saw is his. But I still use it as long as I am alive.

In this case, the rebel son wanted to fully possess all that would be assigned to him. That attitude reveals the deep wretchedness of the rebel. He was essentially saying, “I can’t wait for you to die, Dad. Give me my property right now.” The amazing thing is that the father complied. It is exactly the picture of God the Father sending God the Son to die in the place of us sinners. We have inherited eternal life because God willingly died for us.

The story shows, as do many sinners, that rebellion results in poverty. Some time after getting his way with his father, the son separated far from the father. *Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country (v.13a)*.

The phrase *gathered all he had* comes from a Greek word that gives us the term synagogue, the place for gathering, or the gathering

itself. The word is also used as a financial term that means to gather together physical property and turn it into cash. Therefore, the text reveals that after several days, the rebellious son liquidated the property the father had inherited from his father and had worked so hard to enhance and increase. This meant that Dad and the older brother suddenly had new neighbors who bought one-third of the land. Those new neighbors were farming the land and raising one-third of the sheep and goats that once belonged to Dad.

This very uncomfortable situation came about because all that mattered to the rebel was his desires and plans; he really didn’t care what happened to the family farm or the family. Because life was all about him, it didn’t matter that what Dad had labored to gain over a lifetime now belonged to a stranger who would certainly not take care of it like Dad did.

Selfishness, a root characteristic of sinners, is a most devastating, costly attitude. It is the attitude of your culture. Paul predicted it when, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wrote, *But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-4)*. When the “It’s about Me, Me, Me” attitude trickles down into the church, it muddies the lines between who are the children of God and who are the children deserving God’s wrath.

The rebel son got what he wanted, rejected his father, and squandered “his” property. While in the distant country, *there he squandered his property in reckless living (v.13b)*. He wasted the proceeds that he had gained from liquidating the property. While it is true it was “his” property, the sad truth is that he never earned it. Therefore, it appears he didn’t care how he spent it. The phrase *reckless living* indicates that he enjoyed living the “high life” for a season. Because he was not the one who worked hard and managed well in order to gain wealth, he did not value what he had. He wasted all his father’s fruits of labor.

When the provisions of blessing are gone, they are gone. Your life is a blessing, a gift from God. Once you waste it, all you have left is regret. And all unconfessed, unrepentant sinners waste their lives.

A Poverty-Stricken Rebel (vv.14-16).

The son's poverty was extreme. Like Solomon's warning in Proverbs 6:11, poverty came on him like a robber when the circumstances of life overtook the sinner. *And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need (v.14).* Isn't it interesting that the famine hit **after** the guy spent all his Dad's wealth?

Rebels live for the pleasure of the moment. If they ever think about a day of reckoning, they will kick the can down the road assuming they can take care of the greater matters another day. They fail to acknowledge Scripture truth, "You don't know what tomorrow will bring." James warned us, *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin (James 4:13-17).*

It is strange how people who live in rebellion against their Creator actually think that they can control circumstances. That is because they are rebelling against God's control of their lives. But rebel as they might, God is still the Sovereign Controller of the Universe. Sometimes when God graciously allows painful, losing circumstances to come into a rebel's life, the rebel will pause to think about God for moment. But only for a moment.

Many of you remember the response to the national tragedy of terror on 9/11/01. The attack and phenomenal loss of life and property shook our society to the core. People everywhere prayed, meditated, contemplated, and even talked about God. Suddenly, everyone realized that the greatest nation in the world could not control circumstances. Suddenly, we were faced with the fact that our money could not prevent tragedy. Sadly, the serious contemplation

didn't last long. And now the whole culture is sunk far more deeply in sin than we could have imagined eighteen years ago. God's warning shot did not have a life-changing effect on the culture.

When the rebel fell into the pit of consequences, he sank lower than he could imagine. The rich kid ended up willingly enslaved to pig feeding. *So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs (v.15).* For a Jewish man to work with pigs owned by a Gentile (assumed from the statement about being in a "far country") was unconscionable. The self-righteous Pharisees would have been aghast at this response. This would be as shameful as a girl reared in a Christian home, Christian school, and graduate of a Christian college selling herself into prostitution.

In fact, the Greek word for *hired* does not connote an employee/employer relationship. Rather it speaks of being "joined" as the KJV renders it, the idea of being glued together. Like a slave to a slave owner, the rebel was wholly dependent upon the Gentile pig owner for survival. It is a picture of a poor sinner who slipped further and further into a sinful lifestyle until the alcohol or drugs or sex or covetousness or materialism or whatever the sin owns him or her completely. Jesus expressed that awful condition when He said: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34).*

Things got worse and the rebel sank so low that he was willing to eat pig food. *"And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything" (v.16).* Obviously, pig food would be whatever was discarded by humans. The poor guy could not even find someone to help when he begged. Everyone else was also feeling the pinch of the famine. And when sinners turn to sinners to help them out of the consequences of sin, this is often the kind of response they get.

At this point in the story, things make a huge turn for the better. Sitting in the pig pen, eating pig food, the son acknowledged his impoverished condition. He admitted he was perishing. *"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!'" (v.17)* It is said that the first step in breaking an addiction is to admit that you are addicted. The first step in being rid of the burden of sin, the

guilt you sense every day, is to admit the problem. Say the same thing about yourself that God says about you (confession).

But someone might wonder, “Why did he come to himself?” Why did you or I one day realize our great need for the Great Savior? This is the grace of God. God graciously awakens our spiritually dead consciences to help us see our wretched state. There were no doubt many other rebels in that day who never came to repentance and never returned to the God-ordained authorities to plead for mercy and forgiveness.

Having been enlightened, what did the guy realize? He remembered that his father was actually a very kind and generous man. He proved it in his relationship with his workers. A *hired servant* was not the same as an owned servant or slave. Hired servants were hired for a day to do manual labor (Jesus told the story, Matthew 20:13-14). God’s law protected these people requiring the employer to pay what was owed in a timely fashion (typically at end of day, Deuteronomy 24:14-15). But the rebel’s father went beyond requirement and gave the hired people “*more than enough.*”

Along with realizing his own wretched condition contrasted with his father’s great kindness and generosity, the rebel finally admitted his need to humble himself. He needed to admit that he was a sinner. “*I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned’*” (v.18a). Returning to the father who he had rejected, disdained, dishonored and virtually robbed would require great humility. Likewise, admitting that we have sinned takes humility. Having our sins forgiven does not require us to strike a good bargain with the God we have offended.

Humility requires us to admit who we sinned against. This man realized he sinned “*against heaven and before you*” (v.18b). To admit sin against heaven was to acknowledge that his rebellion was against God first. Admitting offense against a fellow human, someone you can see and have to live with, requires great humbling of self.

Humility also allowed the sinner to admit to what would be just judgment. He would say to his father, “*I am no longer worthy to be called your son*” (v.19a). It is true that his father would have been justified to disown the rebel. The rebel had forfeited his right and, therefore, his worth. But he would plead for mercy, which also requires humility. The man planned to say to his father, “*Treat me as*

one of your hired servants” (v.19b). Humility willingly accepts a lowered position.

Notice also how the rebel was quite sure he would have to work to have his offense covered. This was the rebel’s plan. This is God’s plan for all of us sinners. We must humble ourselves before God’s mighty hand. We must freely acknowledge that we have sinned against Him. We must lay down our arms of rebellion against Him, and take up His case against ourselves. That is a change that takes place in the heart.

A Repentant Rebel (vv.20-24).

The wonderful news is that the son returned to his father (vv.20-21). And when he did, he was confronted with his father’s steadfast love. “*And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him*” (v.20). The penitent understood that he needed to “go back.” Like the sinner who needs to return to his or her Creator to face whatever the offended one requires.

How surprised the penitent is to find the Father’s mercy. This father saw his rebel son a long way off. Had he been watching? Probably not every hour of every day but, yes, watching, longing, hoping. When the righteous is offended against, he or she longs for the offender to allow for restoration. The father’s response was not justice, not vindication, but compassion. Sinners who have been enslaved by sin, who admit their enslaved condition, who desire forgiveness, need compassion. They need God’s compassion. They need the compassion of those who were offended.

This rebel confessed his sin and repented of his sin. “*And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’*” (v.21). This is what he had rehearsed while sitting with the pigs in a far country. It appears to be sincere and genuine confession and repentance.

The son received His father’s love (vv.22-24). He ran head-on into a lavish expression of love. “*But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate’*” (vv.22-23). Surely the father said at

some point, “My son, I forgive you.” But going beyond words, the father demonstrated true love, compassion, forgiveness. Even as God embraces us dirty, smelly sinners who come to Him with all the residue of enslaving sin and washes us pure, clothes us in Christ’s righteousness, and identifies us as His own (the ring).

Why? What was the reason and response for the father to respond in love? “*For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to celebrate*” (v.24). He who was as good as dead is alive. Ironic that the son wanted Dad dead. But it was the son who died in his sin. Like us who were dead in sin, but because of God’s forgiveness we are alive in Christ. The lost was found. And everyone (except one) celebrated.

Jesus desires for us to know how deeply He longs for us to humble ourselves, come to Him, confess our sins, be embraced by His love. Jesus longs for sinners to come back into the condition of love and fellowship with our Creator—the fellowship that was broken by sin. It is a picture of our Heavenly Father’s joy as He embraces a penitent sinner who was dragged through the narrow door of the hog pen where he was humbled.