

December 11, 2022

A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN REJOICING OVER A REPENTANT SINNER

Luke 15:1-32

*(11 of 11 in a series through Luke 7-15)*

A number of years ago, as we were studying Joshua 2, I remember being gripped by the completeness and absoluteness of our redemption. In the book of Joshua, you have a prostitute named Rahab who is so thoroughly forgiven and cleansed that she marries an Israelite named Salmon, and together they have Boaz, who has Obed, who has Jesse, who has David—Israel's greatest king (until Jesus). It is a beautiful story. And I remember saying as we looked at that text together that if we really believed in the power of redemption, then we could imagine the day that a prostitute in Jackson, TN might hear the gospel, believe, be cleansed and forgiven and transformed, and marry one of our sons.

Of course, the effect of saying it that way is that it makes it real, doesn't it? It's one thing to say that being saved makes it so that we're thoroughly forgiven, cleansed, and transformed. It's another to imagine a real-life scenario where a prostitute hears the gospel, believes, and ends up marrying one of our sons. Real-life stories have a way of making you feel a truth and face a truth in a way that you might not feel or be forced to face it if you just heard a statement.

That's what makes Luke 15 so powerful. In this chapter Jesus tells us three parables—parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons—which are powerful (especially the last one). And as he tells each of these parables we get a picture (in the form of a story) of how God approaches and responds to sinners, what it looks like to come to Christ in repentance and faith, and how we can be lost and think all is well with us. So, let's set the stage for these three parables, and then we'll dive in, looking at each of these realities.

The chapter begins once more with a confrontation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. They're always seeking something to attack Jesus about, and this time they grumble against Jesus saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (v. 2). They don't like that Jesus engages with individuals they wouldn't want to get close to. So Jesus answers this with his three parables which each revolve around something lost—a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons. And as he tells these three parables we get a picture of God's heart to seek after, receive, and save sinners.

**A picture of God's heart to seek after, receive, and save sinners**

In the first parable Jesus simply asks, "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it" (v. 4)? The answer, of course, is that they all would do that very thing. You don't just write off a sheep who has wandered away. You leave the others—probably under the oversight of another shepherd or helper—and go after and get the one. Moreover, Jesus adds, that when the shepherd has found his lost sheep, he'll lay it on his shoulders, carry it home, and

when he gets home, call together his family and friends to rejoice that this lost sheep was found. And then Jesus tells us the point of the parable, saying, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v. 7).

Now, the reality is that there is no one righteous who does not need to repent, so Jesus isn't suggesting there's a category of people who don't need the Lord's grace and mercy. Rather, he's addressing the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees who don't see themselves like these sinners that Jesus is receiving and eating with. They don't see themselves in need of grace and mercy. They should be celebrating when they see these sinners Jesus is engaging with repenting, but they're not because they have no real category for grace.

Then, Jesus tells another parable that makes the same point. If the first painted a picture most men in the area could resonate with, this one shifts to a woman in a domestic setting. In this parable, Jesus tells us that a woman has ten silver coins, and she loses one. Therefore, just like the man with the lost sheep, she seeks after it, lighting a lamp, sweeping the house, and seeking diligently until she finds it. And when she has found it, she does just like the shepherd, calling her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost” (v. 9). Then, Jesus adds, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v. 10).

Each of these parables makes this same point that is quite clear when we remember what prompted Jesus to tell each of them. Remember, the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling against Jesus because he was eating with sinners. And Jesus' point in each of the parables is that he is indeed seeking after sinners. He's seeking after what is lost. And if they repent, he does not hold them at arm's length, but he receives them and rejoices over their repentance. This is the heart of our Lord in regards to seeking the lost. He is seeking sinners, will receive them if they turn to him in repentance, and will save them. In other words, Jesus is offering no apologies for seeking after sinners. After all, that's who he came to save. One of the most basic things we celebrate as Christians is that while we were sinners the Lord came for us, sending his Son into the world to live a perfect life of obedience to his Father that none of us could live, to die on the cross to pay for our sins, and to rise from the dead on the third day so that we might repent, believe, and find forgiveness and life in him. And all of that was on his initiative, not ours. He loved us while we were enemies. He sought us while we were sinners. And he receives and saves all who turn to him in repentance and faith. That's what we first see in these parables—a picture of God's heart to seek after, receive, and save sinners. Second, we see a picture of what it looks like for a sinner to come to Christ.

### **A picture of what it looks like for a sinner to come to Christ**

As Jesus tells his third parable, he focuses on two lost sons, but I want to begin by looking at the first of these sons, who provides us a picture of what it looks like for a sinner to come to Christ. The story begins by showing us the depth of the son's sin. He comes to his father, saying, “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me” (v. 12), that is, he wanted his share

of the inheritance. Now, what's so painfully sad about this is that this man was basically saying to his dad that he wished his dad were dead. He's saying to his dad that the only thing of value he saw in him was his money, and since his dad isn't dead yet, he'd like to go ahead and get his share now as if his dad were already gone. And, amazingly, the dad agrees to go ahead and give his youngest son his portion of the inheritance, and then the son goes away to a far country and squanders everything he had in reckless living so that he's broke and has nothing.

Now, just orienting ourselves a bit in this story, this son represents the sinners that Jesus was dining with, calling to repentance, and rejoicing as they came to him. There are several ways we can rebel against God, but one of those paths is obvious to all. It's the path of saying, "I just don't care about God's laws or morals or the like, and I'm just going to embrace absolutely lawless living and my sinful pursuits." That's what this youngest son pictures. But then, notice something happens in the story.

Jesus tells us that a severe famine arose where the youngest son was, and he began to be in need. So, he found himself working for a pig farmer, feeding the man's pigs—something that couldn't be further from where a young Jewish boy would've imagined himself being. And he got so hungry, he longed to eat the food the pigs ate, but nobody gave him anything. He was sitting in a pigsty, starving to death. His sin had left him with absolutely nothing, empty-handed.

Then he began to see how wrong he'd been. Jesus says, "He came to himself" (v.17). The young man took assessment of his life and realized that if he were simply a hired servant in his father's house, he'd have more than enough to eat. And yet here he is starving to death. So, he determines that he'll get up, go to his father and say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants" (vv. 18-19).

This is a picture of what the church has long referred to as the conviction of sin. One of the ways that the Spirit makes someone ready to come to Christ is that he reveals to the person the reality, depth, and wickedness of his sin. If you don't think you really need mercy, then you're not ready to come to Christ. If you feel like providing some excuses for your actions, then you're not ready. But notice this young man does nothing like that. He has no excuses. He's not deceived about ruining his own life. He knows he's to blame. He knows he doesn't even have a claim to be able to still be considered a son. His only hope is that his father will have mercy on him.

Many of you may have experienced this kind of conviction when you came to Christ. Stories of revival are full of stories of men realizing their sin and realizing that they deserve hell because of it. I remember in my own life when I first knew the convicting power of the Spirit, that no one had to tell me I was a sinner or deserved hell. I knew it, and I felt that Christ was my only hope of forgiveness.

Well, the young man goes home, no doubt reciting his request to be a servant to his father in his head on the way. But that moment would never come where he'd be able to deliver his speech

in full because while he father saw him a long way off, he felt compassion for his dear son and took off running to him. He embraced him and kissed him, and as the son began confessing his sin and that he was no longer worthy to be called his son, his father interrupted him, telling 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. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate” (vv. 22-24).

That’s how the Father responds to anyone who—in conviction of sin—turns to him for mercy. The idea that he’ll hold you at arm’s length or will accept you back and forgive you, but only begrudgingly, is a lie from the pit of hell. When a sinner repents all of heaven rejoices, and so does your Father. This is a picture of what it looks like for a sinner to turn to Christ for forgiveness. You just come, owning your sins, and you find yourself in the embrace of a Heavenly Father who rejoices that his lost son has been found. The prodigal has come home. And you don’t have to walk around bearing the shame of your sin. The Father is bragging to the neighbors, if you will, that his son is home. It’s time to celebrate. But, finally, we see a picture of another way we can be lost. We see a picture of a sinner who is deceived.

### **A picture of a sinner who is deceived**

Typically we title this last parable we’re looking at, “The parable of the prodigal son.” But it’s not just about one son who was a terrible sinner and was lost before running home to his father. It’s about two sons who are lost. It’s just harder for us to see that the other son was lost as well because, well, he didn’t see it himself. His sinful state didn’t manifest itself in debauchery but in self-righteousness.

As the parable continues, everyone is partying and celebrating the repentance and return of the younger son when his older brother comes near the house and hears the music and dancing. So, he calls one of the servants to see what is going on, and he’s told, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound” (v. 27).

Now, you’d think this would be an opportunity for the older brother to celebrate as well. This is good news. But he doesn’t join in the celebration. Rather, he’s angry and refuses to join in the party, so the father comes out and pleads with him to enter. Why doesn’t he want to go in? The son tells his father, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him” (vv. 29-30)! And the father answered him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (vv. 31-32).

So, what’s going on here? Well, just as the younger brother who went out and lived a life of debauchery before coming home and finding mercy with his father represents the sinners that Jesus is eating with at the beginning of the chapter, so this son represents another group. He

represents the Pharisees. Note the elements. Just as the older son says, “I never disobeyed your command” to his father, so the Pharisees looked at themselves as righteous in no need of grace or mercy. And just as the older son could at any point have enjoyed all that his father had, so the Pharisees could have stopped at any point in their opposition to Jesus and, instead, bowed the knee to him in repentance and faith, and they would have known all the blessings that these repentant sinners were receiving—life, forgiveness, etc. But like this older son, the Pharisees wouldn’t. They didn’t see themselves in need of repenting of anything, just as the older son didn’t.

You see, there are two paths of rebellion that we can take (or at least two). One of them is pictured in this younger son who represents the sinners that Jesus was eating with and calling to repentance. They are those who share their testimonies and show a life that was filled with unrighteous living, drunkenness, violence, sexual immorality, and the like. We know those testimonies, don’t we? But that’s not the only road of rebellion. Another is when you live what looks like a very moral life. It’s the kind of life that parents will be proud of, and others will be impressed by. But you never feel that you’re a sinner who deserves the judgment of God and have no experience of the conviction of sin that the younger brother knew in that pigsty. And that person is just as much in need of forgiveness and mercy from the Lord.

What we need to realize—and this is what the Pharisees and scribes were missing—is that the man who lives a terrible life and repents will be in heaven while the man who volunteers at a homeless shelter after work and uses his vacation time to visit orphanages but never repents and comes to Christ will be in hell. And he’ll be there as self-righteous as these Pharisees and the older brother in the story—refusing God’s mercy because he doesn’t think he needs it. All of us are in need of mercy, and if you never realize it and come to Christ for it, you’ll face his wrath on the day of judgment.

But how glorious it is to come to him in repentance! If there’s anything that the text clearly communicates, it’s that our Lord is willing to receive repentant sinners and will shower on them mercy and grace that seems too good to be true. All of heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents. The father doesn’t even wait for his rebellious son get all the way back or agree to let him be on the level of a hired servant. He rushes toward him, hugs him, kisses him, and starts ordering his servants to get everything together to make sure his son knows he’s fully restored. Even when his older son refuses to come to the party and tells his dad that he’s a fool for celebrating the return of his rebellious son, the father continues pleading with his self-righteous older son to see that mercy is available to him too.

So, if you’ve been holding on to your sin and letting the devil convince you that the Lord wants nothing to do with you because of what you’ve done, just stop listening to the devil. Come to your senses. Bring nothing to the Lord but an honest confession that you’ve sinned. Come to him, and you’ll know mercy. When the Lord wanted to picture to us how he’ll respond to our repentance, he chose a picture of an old man running out, embracing, and kissing his repentant son. So, come to him. And if you’ve never thought you need forgiveness, repent of that self-righteousness this morning and come to the Lord and find mercy and grace. If you don’t, you’ll

not only fail to know the Lord, but you'll never be able to delight in the grace he shows others. Unless you've tasted grace you don't know how to delight in grace. And, finally, let's make sure that we're like Jesus, not writing off sinners but taking the gospel to them and holding out the hope of forgiveness and life and mercy from a God who rejoices over one sinner who repents. So let's come to the table this morning and remember why we can receive so much mercy. It's because Christ has paid for our sins. Let's give thanks to him for that now. Amen.