

Our Generous Joyful God

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[0 : 00] The book of Luke, chapter 15, on page 1048. And we're going to be thinking together about what will be for many of us a very familiar parable.

From verse 11 onwards, but we're going to read the whole chapter. The parable of our generous, joyful God.

So Luke 15, page 1048, beginning at verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. 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.

[1 : 03] Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep. 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.

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 neighbours 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. Jesus continued, Jesus continued, 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 and wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

[2 : 12] He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 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, 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. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. And 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.

[3 : 16] He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. 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. 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. 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.

[4 : 20] Stories are powerful things, aren't they? Salman Rushdie, the author, said that those who do not have the power over the story that dominates their lives truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts.

And if we were to ask someone who was always told, You'll never amount to anything, I'm sure that they would agree. If we were to go into a culture where your class or your caste determines your work and your future, your friendships, your station in life, I'm sure they would understand that stories can become like weapons.

They can be a way to keep people down. In a way, they can extinguish hope. They can say, Well, we are on the side that is right and you, you are permanent outsiders.

Just ask the religious outsiders of Jesus' day. What was the story that they heard? When we look at these first couple of verses, as we have the scene, why Jesus tells the parable, we've got tax collectors, we've got sinners gathering round to hear Jesus because they knew there was a different story.

And then you've got the Pharisees and the teachers of the law complaining about Jesus spending time with the sinners because the story that they told, the dominant religious group, they told the story that the world is divided into good guys and bad guys.

[5 : 54] There is them and there is us. The good guys, well, we are pure. We keep God's law. Well, God is pleased with us. But for the bad guys, the ones who are not like us, well, there's no hope for you.

You can't make the grade. You are outside of God's care. Jesus offers hope. But sadly, sadly, this is how some people think about Christianity.

Maybe this is the story that you grew up with, perhaps, that Christianity is about keep these rules, attain to this standard, and if you do, God may be happy with you.

But if not, you are doomed to be on the outside. Jesus is someone who knows the power of story, which is why he tells so many stories.

He tells those stories, those parables, to correct distortions, distortions, to bring true thoughts of God, where the story of God's mercy and grace had been sidelined.

[7 : 05] He brings stories that bring hope, that extend hope to all. And Jesus also tells these stories in particular to defend and to explain his mission.

He spends time with the social, moral, religious outsiders, and people looked at him and wondered why in the world he would do that. And so Jesus tells these stories to say that his mission is rooted in the mission of God and displays the heart of God to us.

So let's look at this story that Jesus tells in order to fix the distortions that were around in his day, perhaps distortions that exist in our own hearts as we come to think about God.

But the story begins in verse 11 with a rejected father. We're going to concentrate on the father in the story and it begins with a father who is rejected.

So we discover in verse 11, there is a man, he has two sons, and one of those sons, the younger, comes with a very shocking request.

[8 : 23] Shocking in any culture probably, but here in a culture where to disrespect or to abandon, to fail to show care to your father could be considered a crime, this is a truly horrible thing to say.

Effectively saying, Father, I can't wait till you're dead. I want my share of the inheritance right now. Here is a son with very little care for his father. He just wants his father's stuff.

And we see that because very quickly after, in verse 13, he leaves home. He wants to run wild and free. Life with the father is restricting my freedom.

Now the shackles are off. Now I can have the kind of life I always imagined. Maybe some of us have lived that story as the father or as the son perhaps.

How does this father respond to the disrespect and the rejection that he experiences? He doesn't do what some in the culture would expect.

[9 : 24] He doesn't say, absolutely not. Or he doesn't beat him or disown him or throw him out. Rather, we're told, the end of verse 12, he divided his property between them.

That word property is the word bios. It's a reminder that here he is dividing those resources that he has for living on. The father bears the cost of this painful rejection.

And here we find in just a few short sentences in a couple of scenes, Jesus invites us into the drama of human history and the story of our rejection of our creator, of our father.

Because all of us at some point or another in our lives have said to God, I will live in your worlds. I will enjoy your good gifts.

I will take your generosity, but I don't want you. All of us have at different times and in different ways said, I love the created things, I'm just not that interested in the creator.

[10:44] There are different times and in different ways we have chosen to love and honor and value other things and other people rather than giving true worship and ultimate value to God.

This is our story. To turn your back on your family, it is one thing. And this disrespect perhaps shocks us and it should shock us.

But to turn our back on our God. And what we discover here is that all of Jesus' audience is included in this rejection of the creator.

Perhaps the Pharisees at this point in the story were sitting by kind of smugly thinking, well, those bad guys over there might have rejected God, but not us. But then you get to the end of the story, verses 28 and 29, you see the older brother, the good living one, the one who represents the religious folks.

He also treats the father shamefully. And what we discover is that all of us without exception are indicted as we read of a rejected father.

[12:00] We're drawn into the story. The story moves on. There is a rejected father, but we see the story of an incredibly generous father.

So the story for the younger son does not go well. We read it there, verses 13 to 16. He'd hoped for freedom. Essentially, he found slavery. Life without restrictions has not brought him the endless joy he was hoping for.

It's brought him into misery. It's brought him into shame. It's brought him near to death. So that in verse 17, there is a transition.

He comes to his senses. He begins to think in his misery and he resolves certain things. He resolves, first of all, to return. I'm going to go back to my father's house because at least there I won't starve to death.

Crucially, he resolves to repent. He resolves to acknowledge that before God and before his father, he has sinned in the way he has treated his father.

[13:10] And he also resolves in his own heart that he's going to try and repay his father back. He doesn't expect to get a place at the family table again but he thinks, well, perhaps if I work for my dad then I can repay some of that disgrace.

Perhaps I can repay some of the money. So he comes to his senses, he makes these resolves and he begins to head for home.

But what happens as he gets near to the family farm? Look with me at verse 20. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son through his arms around him and kissed him. The son hadn't recognized the size of the father's heart. He hadn't comprehended the depth of his father's love.

He hadn't appreciated fully the extent of his father's generosity. Here we see a longing father who saw his son while he was still a long way off.

[14:23] The implication, he's always looking, he's always hoping, and when he sees him, he's filled with what? Not bitterness, not resentment, but compassion.

His instinct is to love and to show mercy. It's a longing father, it's a loving father who embraced this boy in his filth, in his shame, in his starvation, who doesn't keep him at a distance saying, well, I told you so.

He doesn't involve him in some kind of shaming ceremony. Rather, he embraces him with love. For the people listening to Jesus, they would have been shocked by this father's generous grace.

It shocks because it is so open, it's so free. This father gives to his son exactly what he does not deserve. In verse 21, he receives generous forgiveness.

So notice the father, the son comes to the father and confesses sin. And if the son had been able to continue with his planned dialogue, he would have said, well, I know I'm not worthy to be called a son, but you can make me into a servant.

[15 : 43] But what does the father do? He accepts the son's confession of his sin and he refuses to leave him outside of the family. He doesn't say, okay, well, let's put you on probation for a while and let's see how you go with earning my respect and my trust.

He doesn't ask him to prove that he's really sorry. He receives the confession and he welcomes him back in. And it's a generous welcome.

Look what happens to the boy in verse 22. He's welcomed not as a hired worker, but as a valued family member. He gets the indicators of being part of the family.

He gets the ring. He gets the quality clothes, the robe, and the sandals. This is a personal message to the son who was afraid of what response he would get.

You are my son and I love you. And this is also a very public message because the whole community will be involved in the feast and the whole community will see this father receiving the son back with joy.

[16 : 53] This grace is to be celebrated and shared and there is this celebration. And again, it's not just the basics. The boy comes back starving close to death.

The father doesn't throw him a crusty loaf of bread. What he does in verse 23 is he orders that the fattened calf be killed.

That there be this great feast where only the best will do. This fattened calf usually saved maybe for a family wedding. Here there is celebration because this boy to all intents and purposes was dead. But now to the father he is alive. And so there is celebration. What is Jesus doing here? He's recovering for us the true story that the Pharisees had lost.

The true story of God's character. Of God's heart. God is not mean spirited. If that's your picture of God then it's not a true picture as Jesus points out to us.

[18 : 03] God is generous to prodigal sons. To prodigal daughters. To those who have made a mess of life perhaps.

He doesn't leave us asking have I been sorry enough? Have I repented enough that God will take me to be one of his?

Rather what we discover this is a love that is not earned. It's a love that's freely given to all who come to him. And it's a love that it's extravagantly given.

Grace is beautiful in its expansiveness. So here is hope for prodigals everywhere.

A hope that the Pharisees tried to deny. The hope that a works-based religion most certainly denies. There is hope here.

[19 : 01] No matter who we are, no matter what we've done, no matter what our experiences have been, here is a loving father. God the loving father with arms open wide to receive any who like this son will say sorry for sin, who will turn to him in faith.

Here is hope to for our prodigals, the family members, the friends that cause us heartache because of life choices and where they're at right now.

Here is a reminder to us, God is generous in his grace, so we are to keep praying for them, to keep loving them, to keep looking to this father that Jesus speaks of, to remember the hope of the gospel and Jesus, the one who goes to the ends of the earth in order to bring people back home to God.

How do we see this generosity working itself out in the story of Jesus? In verse 24 we have these words from the father, this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.

How is it that spiritually dead people find life? How is it that people who are lost and far from God are found by him and find a way home?

[20 : 33] What's through Jesus? Remember, this parable is Jesus defending his mission and what characterizes Jesus' mission? It's a rescue mission of grace.

That's why the Pharisees couldn't understand him. He spends time loving, serving, seeking to save the weak, the lost, the sinful because that's what he came to do.

That's what he came to do for us. He came to do that ultimately at the cross. He would give himself to death for our sin so that through him we might know true life.

He was the one on the cross who became lost to his father so that through faith in him we might be found by the father and welcomed home with joy.

The generosity that is spoken of in this parable we see most clearly at the cross. That's the generosity that we are invited to respond to.

[21 : 38] Jesus knew the generous grace of God and he came to demonstrate for us the generous grace of God. That influenced his rescue mission.

For those of you who are part of this church I hope you had a chance to read the latest newsletter from Emmanuel Rianno, one of our members who's serving in Colombia.

If you haven't it's out on the board there. There's a great story there of a pastor, a pastor by the name of Pastor Amilcar and he felt God calling him into a new sphere of service, called to go and make disciples of a particular kind.

And so what Pastor Amilcar now does in his Colombian town is he will drive around in his pickup truck and he'll look for the guys who are lying drunk on the pavement or drugged on the pavement, those who are kind of in a real state because of various circumstances.

And he'll take them into his pickup, he'll take them back to church, he'll give them a meal, he'll wash them up and he'll share the good news of Jesus with them. Why?

[22 : 50] Because he is somebody who has known the grace of the Lord Jesus in his own life in that same way. God's rescue mission to us influences the rescue mission we are to engage in for others.

And here's this wonderful reminder that no one is beyond the grace and forgiveness of our generous and joyful God that by trusting in this Jesus to forgive and save us that you and I we can be welcomed into the family of God, whoever we are, whoever we've been, because God is this generous Father.

So it's the story of a generous Father, it's also the story of a joyful Father. Father. It's a really interesting parable this one because it almost has two endings.

You know we could stop at verse 24 and we'd have the happily ever after ending, the ending most of our children's storybook Bibles have. But this parable has a twist.

It's got as it were a second ending because it reminds us there's another brother in the story and as the story goes, as this brother hears the good news of his brother being safe and alive and there being joy.

[24 : 12] We see in verse 28, we see anger, we see refusal to come in, we hear this brother's accusations against the Father, we feel his anger and injustice burning.

What's happened is the generous grace of his father has now exposed what lurks in this elder brother's heart. heart. So he'll say to his dad, this dad, this dad that we've just met, verse 29, you're like a slave driver.

That's how distorted his thinking was about his father. He thinks that a place in the family is based on earning approval.

He's got it so badly wrong. And this father, this generous father, this joyful father, in verse 28, goes out to plead with this son, saying to him in verse 31, my son, you're always with me and everything I have is yours.

In other words, remember the right to sonship is yours. Just ask. Don't stay outside in your misery and your anger. Just ask. And you too can be experiencing this joy.

[25 : 31] And then he says to this son who's harboring so much anger, who's so disgruntled, verse 32, we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. It is essential to the character of his father. It's essential to the heart of his father that he had to rejoice at this great restoration that's taking place.

That he gets to welcome this son home. But we have an older brother who's miserable. He's miserable because he's trying to earn by merit what can only be enjoyed by grace.

And that's a miserable place to be. Where you're always comparing just like this brother. Well hang on a minute. I live better than this guy. Never confident of the father's unconditional love because we make it about ourselves rather than the generous grace of father God.

That was the way the Pharisees minds worked. And that's the way a religious system based on works and performance operates. that I can feel good if I think that I have made the grade.

[26 : 54] But will I ever know if I've made the grade? And then there's moments of despair when things go badly. Perhaps again this is your idea of how Christianity operates.

And Jesus tells this story to bring us true thoughts about God. And true thoughts about the way into God's kingdom. It's not God's way that we have to slave and earn to be accepted.

Jesus teaches God's joy in forgiving and God's generous grace. Jesus as it were wants to give us new lenses through which to view reality.

You know if I take my glasses off to snipe that's quite disconcerting. If I do that two things happen. One is immediate. Everybody becomes fuzzy. Really fuzzy.

And two if we were to continue this out on the street I would most likely walk past most of you without knowing. Because I cannot see clearly the reality in front of me.

[28 : 04] Jesus is trying to do that with this parable. He's trying to bring reality into sharp clarity for us. To see on the one hand that when it comes to God truly we are guilty.

That none of us can stand before God and say my record is good enough for you to accept me. And also to see with clarity God's generous grace.

And he is telling us this story so that we won't walk by. So we won't think well it's all right. That we would see this as a wonderful, as a glorious thing.

That it would change our hearts and our lives. So Jesus in this story is pointing us to the problem of our hearts whether we are sort of the religious good guys by nature or whether we're the not religious the bad guys of the story.

That both whoever we are in different ways reject and treat the father, our father, the creator, shockingly. So that everybody stands in need of grace and forgiveness.

[29 : 14] And the good news is that everybody is freely offered that grace and forgiveness in Jesus. So here is Jesus giving us this beautiful picture of the love of God.

Here is a father who pays the price to restore relationships that have been broken. Here is a God who goes seeking and searching for those who are lost and on the outside.

Here is one who forgives generously and joyfully welcomes prodigals in. Stories are powerful.

The stories of Jesus are powerful because they point us to great truth. And in this truth there is freedom. Freedom to live with hope and to live with joy.

Knowing that we've been forgiven and accepted if we're trusting in Jesus. And also to live with purpose. Because this is a story not just for ourselves.

[30 : 16] This is a story for everyone. So our mission is to take this great story. This great gospel story. And to share it with others.

With our friends. With our community. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.