

Scandalous Love

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] Our text today and next Sunday is the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Many have called this chapter the Gospel within the Gospel, and rightly so, for here we have God's good news in pure form, if you will, and especially in the parable of the prodigal father.

Now, most of us in this room have heard this story many times, and yet I think most of us in this room long to hear it again and again and again. I'm coming to the conclusion that I probably ought to preach Luke 15 at least once a year, every year, if for no one else's benefit than my own.

The story Jesus teaches here has redemptive power in any cultural setting, but the story really comes alive and therefore has its transforming power in our lives.

When we hear this story in its original cultural setting, that is in a Middle Eastern Asian cultural setting. Ready? Luke 15, verse 1, hear the word of the Lord.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

[1 : 22] So he told them this parable. Jesus goes on then to tell the parable of the shepherd and his lost sheep, the woman and her lost coins, and the father and his lost sons.

Now, whenever we read Jesus' story, we need to remember that Jesus first told the story to scribes and Pharisees. This story is told for the benefit of scribes and Pharisees.

And we need to remember that Jesus told the story to justify actions which the scribes and Pharisees considered to be scandalous. Let me say that again.

The story is told to scribes and Pharisees, and it is told to justify his actions which the scribes and Pharisees thought were scandalous. Who are these scribes and Pharisees with whom Jesus seems to always be in conflict?

The scribes are the professional theologians of the day. They're the seminary professors and the ecclesiastical lawyers. They were trusted with the task of teaching and protecting the law of God and all the oral tradition that came around it.

[2 : 32] It was incumbent upon their office to interrogate Jesus about his teachings. The Pharisees are the devout lay leaders of the day. They are the elders and deacons and ushers and Sunday school teachers.

And they are committed to obeying the law of God. And they're committed to obeying the 621 additional rules and regulations that were built up around the basic Ten Commandments.

Now, although the scribes and Pharisees received rather bad press in the Gospels, we shouldn't be too hard on them. They were well-motivated people. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to be holy.

They wanted to be pleasing to God. And they wanted to help other people be holy. You cannot fault them for that motivation. It's a great motivation. The problem was their concept of holiness. For them, holiness meant conformity to rules and regulations.

For them, one achieves holiness by keeping rules and regulations. They missed the point. Holiness cannot be legislated. Holiness comes from an intimate relationship with someone who is holy.

[3 : 43] And that relationship cannot be achieved, and it cannot be maintained by mere conformity to rules and regulations. Now, this is the crucial fact to keep in mind whenever you read Jesus' story.

The scribes and Pharisees thought of themselves as the protectors of the reputation of Israel's law. And therefore, they thought of themselves as the protectors of the reputation of Israel's God.

As far as the scribes and Pharisees are concerned, Jesus of Nazareth is shaming God's reputation. That is what you have to hang on to.

As far as they're concerned, as far as the religious people of Jesus' day are concerned, Jesus of Nazareth is shaming God's reputation, shaming the name of God. At issue for them is the character

of the holy God.

Now, who are the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus always seems to be in company? The tax collectors were Jews who were collecting taxes for the Romans.

[4 : 51] And they would have the right to collect tax in a certain area as long as they delivered a certain percent of the taxes to the Romans. The Romans didn't care what other taxes these Jews then charged on other Jews, which meant that tax collectors are people who are ripping off their own people.

The word sinner is the Pharisee's word. Do you know, Jesus never addresses someone using the word sinner. He speaks of sinners, but it's always out there.

He never points at someone and uses this word sinner. It's the Pharisee's words. And it refers to those who broke the law. Such people were considered unclean. They were ostracized by those who thought that they were keeping the law.

Now, sinners and tax collectors flocked to Jesus. They could tell that there was something different about this rabbi. They wanted to be near Jesus. And scandal of scandals, Jesus wanted to be near them.

Jesus received sinners. Jesus welcomed sinners. The word Luke uses there literally means welcomed into fellowship. Welcome as a member of your family. Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners as members of his family.

[6 : 02] Scandal. But the really scandalous thing to the scribes and Pharisees was that Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors.

He ate with them. Now, in a Middle Eastern mindset, eating with someone means so much more than it does in our culture. To eat with someone in a Middle Eastern culture is a sacramental act. It signifies total acceptance. Total acceptance. I learned this in Manila. I met a Muslim from Iran named Mansour Shai Estepour.

And we became acquainted and started having lunch together in a Mexican restaurant in Manila. This Muslim... That's the kind of world we live in, isn't it? After we had finished eating this meal together, Mansour turns to me.

He's a big guy, about 6'6". He turns to me and says, You are now my friend forever. Whatever I have is now yours. Scandal of scandal.

[7 : 05] This man welcomes sinners and he eats with them. It's said out of disgust and anger because the religious folk at that point are saying that Jesus of Nazareth is now shaming the reputation of Israel's law and he is thereby shaming the reputation of Israel's God.

Shaming, shaming, shaming by his actions. Jesus then responds to this accusation by telling the parables recorded in Luke 15. They are often called the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons.

And that's unfortunate. Because the subject of these parables is not who or what is lost, but whose is lost. The emphasis is not on the lost sheep.

It's not on the lost coin. It's not on the lost sons. The emphasis is on the shepherd and the woman and the father. Now, here's the most important fact to remember as we go into this story.

Through these parables, Jesus is painting a portrait of the living God. Jesus is painting a portrait of the holy God whose reputation the scribes and Pharisees are so zealous to protect.

[8 : 22] Here is the incarnate God. Here is the one who can say, whoever has seen me has seen the father, now painting a picture of the father. Here is the one who knows the father's heart.

Here is the one who comes from the father's heart. And now he is going to draw a picture of the father's heart so that we can be pulled into that heart. Which is why these parables have had such a powerful effect on the soul of humanity over the years.

In the feelings of the shepherd for his sheep and in his actions toward the sheep. In the feelings of this woman toward her coins and her actions toward the coins. And in the feelings of the father toward his sons and his action toward the sons, we discover who God is and what God is like.

This is so crucial to grasp. The subject of these stories is the holy one whose reputation the scribes and Pharisees want to protect.

Are you with me? Are you with me? Now the irony is, through these stories, Jesus heightens the scandal. He's going to make things worse.

[9 : 32] Let me show you. Luke 15, verse 11. There was a man who had two sons. Two sons.

This tells us that we will miss the message of this story if we focus on only one son. The fact of the matter is, this parable is told for the benefit of the second son.

Both sons, it turns out, leave their father. Both sons are profoundly dysfunctional. It came from a good father. Both sons leave their father.

The younger son, by traveling to the far country, the older son, while staying at home, which we'll look at next Sunday. The younger son says to his father, verse 12, Father, give me my share of the estate that falls to me.

That is a terribly cruel thing to say. It's as though he said, Father, let's just pretend that you're dead, and you give me what's going to come to me when you do die. Dr. Kenneth Bailey is a Presbyterian theologian missionary who has spent most of his life in Egypt and Lebanon and Israel, studying Scripture in the Middle Eastern context.

[10:49] And in his book, *The Cross and the Prodigal*, he points out that such a request is unheard of in a Middle Eastern culture. It is impossible. It is imaginable, unimaginable.

Dr. Bailey says that he has tested this in endless villages throughout the Middle East. He asked villagers, Has anyone in your village ever said what this boy said? And the answer is always no.

Then he says, If anyone did make this request, what would happen? The answer is always, Why the father would beat the boy. He asked why.

And the answer is always, Because the request means he wants the father to die. He wants him to die. I tested this among the Ifagal people in the northern part of the Philippines.

The Ifagal people are the ones who made the rice terraces. David and I were up there for a conference where I spoke, and I tested this, and I asked them, In that culture, What would you do if a son asked his father in this way?

[11:49] And they said, Why the father would have to beat the son, of course. What a self-centered, demanding, rebellious, ungrateful kid. Father, give me. Give me is the keynote of his conversation.

Give me my share of your wealth. Now here we learn something about the nature of sin. We learn here that sin is not breaking the rules, although that is involved, but sin is fundamentally breaking a relationship.

At the beginning of the story, the younger son does not break any rules, but he has broken his father's heart, right? We'll see next week that the older son who stays home breaks his father's heart at an even deeper level.

Now, how does this father respond to this young son's cruel request? Well, he responds in a surprising way. As the Middle Eastern villagers told Kenneth Bailey, the father is expected to beat this son.

But what does the father portrayed by Jesus do? Verse 12, He grants the request. He divided his wealth between them, says Jesus.

[12:57] The father gives the son one-third of the family wealth. One-third. And lets the son go. This tells us something about the love of God.

It tells us that the love of God is not possessive. That love gives the freedom to refuse to be loved. And there are times when God lets us have our way. There's another surprise in the father's response.

At this point in the story, the Middle Eastern listener expects the father to at least say something like, Okay, go, but you are no longer my son. But this father does not say that.

And in so doing, he is choosing now to suffer more deeply. He is choosing to open himself up to more pain by choosing to keep this relationship. Remember now, Jesus is painting a picture, a portrait of the living God whose reputation the professionals are zealous to protect.

Well, the younger son then gathers together all of his assets and sets off to the far country. The word translated in verse 13, gathered together, should be rendered, turned into cash. He liquidates his assets so he can travel quickly and lightly.

[14:14] He goes from house to house, from shop to shop, selling his father's stock in Bethlehem Steel and Arabian oil and Dead Sea Fish and Chips and McDavid burgers. Just wanted to see if you were listening. Notice in verse 13 that Jesus says, The son does this quickly.

Not many days later, says Jesus. Not many days later. The reason for his haste is not simply to get on with the journey, but rather, as Kenneth Bailey suggests, as this boy goes from one perspective buyer to another, the intensity of the community hatred and disgust mounts, at every turn he is

greeted with amazement, horror, and rejection.

Shame, shame, shame, shame. This boy now needs to leave the village as quickly as he can to protect his own life. This part of the cultural setting will become important later on in the story.

Now, the son leaves, goes to a far country away from his people, squanders all his wealth on loose living. Loose living is a biblical euphemism for wine, women, and song. He lives high on the hog, although I suppose a Jewish boy would not choose to express it just that way.

The son lives so loosely that he loses everything. He loses one-third the family's wealth.

[15:32] Now, I'm not a wealthy man, but one of my kids loses one-third of what I do have. One-third the family's wealth.

Then a famine hits. Thank God it does not go well in the far country. Give thanks to God that when he gives us our way, it does not go well.

When he had lots of money, he had lots of friends. Now that he has no money left, he has no friends, and he begins to be in need. Why doesn't he go home? Eventually, in the story, he does go home, but why doesn't he immediately go home?

He doesn't go home because he's afraid to go home. And why is he afraid to go home? Well, for one thing, he'll have to face the taunting and jesting of the villagers as he comes through the village gates.

So, you went off to enjoy the good life. Look at you now, hungry and dirty, a total failure. He cannot, at that point, contemplate enduring such shame. I was talking with a man who had moved from the beautiful countryside of the Philippines into the big city of Manila for a better job and therefore a better way of living.

[16:44] But he found the opposite. He found no work, and now he was living in the slums. And I asked him, why don't you go home? And he wouldn't answer me. I asked him again, why don't you go home? He wouldn't answer.

And then finally, an older Filipino came to me and told me that he had lost face with his friends in his village when he left. He couldn't go home. There was too much shame to go home. And he would rather endure poverty than to face that kind of shame.

This boy would rather do that at this point than face the shame of the villagers. Furthermore, he does not want to go home because he's going to encounter the hostility and anger of the elders of the village.

They might beat him. They might make things so miserable for him that he will even starve in that village. Again, I tried this on the Ifagal people, and I said, if a guy did this to his father and went and squandered one-third of the family wealth and then came back, what would you elders in the village do to him?

He said, well, we would either beat him or we would starve him to death. Furthermore, the boy does not choose to go home because he fears the scorn of the older brother. The older brother might say, you lousy, good-for-nothing bum.

[17:48] You wasted one-third of the family wealth. You have no right to be here. Or if the brother had some kind of mercy, he might say, you blew it. Go back and get that wealth. When you get it back, maybe you can come.

I wonder how many younger siblings miss out on the father's or mother's love because of the attitude of the older sibling.

I'm the oldest of five sons. I know of what I speak. Scribes and Pharisees, if they let you in at all, demand that you first measure up. And the younger brother will endure the famine before he endures the scorn from his older brother.

There's one other thing that explains why the son does not go home at this time, and it is his father. The son fully expects the anger, scorn, punishment, and rejection of the father. The father has every right to feel that way.

The father has every right to forget the son. The father has every right to say, you made your bed, now you sleep in it. So the son chooses to stay away in the far country.

[18:56] Verse 15, he goes to one of the citizens of that country, to a Gentile, and he begs for work. There's an interesting point here. The word translated, he attached himself, verse 15, he attached himself to one of the Gentiles, literally means he glued himself.

Gentiles. It's painting a picture of sheer desperation. He's forcing himself on this Gentile. I'll do anything, and it's very likely that this Gentile is so bugged by this guy that he gives a Jewish boy a

job he's sure the Jewish boy will reject.

Go feed the pigs. But the boy is so desperate, he even takes that. The situation begins to worsen. He would gladly have eaten whatever the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything, not even pig food, to eat.

Then Jesus says in verse 17, the younger son comes to his senses. Verse 17, how many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I'm here starving to death?

What made this boy come to his senses? What triggered him to come to his senses? Partly it was his need, but Dale Bruner helped me understand the depth of this.

[20 : 06] What brought this boy to his senses was the memory of his father. The memory of his father. He remembers how good his father is. How many of my father's hired men have food to spare?

He remembers that his father treated the servants generously. He remembered the way his father treated the clerk at the market. He remembered the way the father treated the guy at the gas station.

He remembers the way his father treated people as he walked along the street. He remembered how good his father was. I pray that my kids will remember.

So the son reasons to himself, what am I doing here? I'll get up, I'll go home, and I'll ask to be made a hired hand. I'll face the taunting and jesting of the villagers. I'll face that rejection of beliefs.

At least I will not starve. So, he heads off, ragged, dirty, nothing left of the inheritance. And as he walks home, he puts a speech together. Have you ever been in trouble with your parents?

[21 : 11] Any of you? Front row, a couple of you over here, a couple of you. You remember when you're in trouble with your parents or you're on your way home and you're making up a speech? You rehearse that speech.

Well, this kid has a speech. It's in verses 18 and 19. And this kid's a good Presbyterian because it has three parts. And I can imagine him practicing this speech over and over again.

Part one, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Part one is his confession of sin.

He knows that what he did is wrong. Part two, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Part two is his affirmation of the consequences of his sin. He knows that he has shamed the father. He has shamed the village. He has shamed the brother. He has shamed the family. And he knows that this has broken the relationship and he knows that he has no right to it anymore.

Part three, make me as one of your hired men. Part three is his offer to make up for it, his offer to pay off the debt. Review the speech. Three parts. Part one, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

[22 : 13] Part two, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Part three, make me to be one of your hired men. Say them with me. Part one, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Part two, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Part three, make me as one of your hired men. He goes over and over and over, repeats this over as he makes his way home.

Now finally, we come to the heart of the story. Remember why Jesus is telling this story. He is justifying, he is interpreting his behavior, which the scribes and Pharisees thought was scandalous.

At this point, I think the scribes and Pharisees were listening very carefully. Jesus says in verse 20, but while the son was a long way off, yes, Jesus, his father saw him.

Surprise! Everyone in that day expected the father to have forgotten the son, to have lost himself in his business. But no, this father has been longing for his son.

[23 : 24] He has been looking. He has been waiting for his son. Thus the great German preacher Helmut Thielicke entitles his book on the parable The Waiting Father. What a picture of the living God.

While the son was a long way off, the father saw him. Do you believe he sees you? Do you believe he sees your children or grandchildren, some of whom are in the far country?

Jesus continues, verse 20, and he felt compassion for him. Another surprise. You see, everyone in that day expected scorn and disgust and indignation.

The kid blew it. He wouldn't listen. He had to have his way. Well, let him have his way. But no, this father is filled with compassion. The word Luke uses here is the word *splanchnite* and it refers to the guts, to the inner bowels of the body.

The father is deeply moved. He's ripped up in his guts. He has been ripped up since the son left. What a picture Jesus is painting. The suffering father.

[24 : 35] Jesus continues, verse 20, and the father ran to his son. Another surprise. The father ran. You see, in the Middle East and in Asia, a father of the man's age and a father of the man's stature never ran anywhere for any reason at all.

To run in public meant having to lift the front hem of his robe like a teenager and thereby exposing his undergarments. A very shameful act. Jesus says, the father ran.

Literally, he says, the father raced. The father raced toward his son. What a picture of the living God Jesus is painting. The racing father. Can you see him?

Racing toward you? And toward those you think are lost? Why run? Why does the father run? Because he longs to see his son.

That's clear. But he also runs, and this is where the culture comes into play here. The father knows what the son is going to encounter when he comes into the village gates.

[25 : 41] The father knows that the son is going to be heckled and humiliated. The father knows that the son may even be beaten by the elders, and so the father runs to head it all off.

Scandalous act on the part of the father. The father, Jesus continues, verse 20, and the father embraced him through his arms around him and kissed him. Literally, he kept kissing him and kissing him again and again and again.

What a scandalous picture Jesus is painting of the Holy One. The father should have remained back in the house. The father should have remained distant and cool at the arrival of the son who squandered one-third of the family wealth who shamed the father's name, shamed the brother's name, shamed the village name.

But no, Jesus knows a different kind of father. Father. Jesus knows a different kind of father. This father has been waiting, looking, longing, suffering, and when he sees his son, he runs, he throws his arms around him, he kisses him dirty though he may be, and by that act, the father then took all the shame of the son onto himself.

That act transferred the shame of the son onto the father. It's as though the father said to the elders and the older brother, whatever it was you wanted to do to my son, you must now do to me.

[27 : 07] Oh. While stunned by this surprising love, this scandalous love, the son gives his speech. Remember, it has three parts. The son begins, verse 21, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you.

The father lets the son say part one. This is redemptive. God will let us give our confession. God hears our confession. It clears the air. The son continues, verse 21.

I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. The father lets him say part two. It must be said. For it means we realize how damaging sin is.

We realize that sin has damaged this relationship. There's a third part. Make me to be one of your hired men. So the son takes a deep breath. But before he can give part three of the speech, the father surprises him again.

The father interrupts his speech with his own speech. That interruption, brothers and sisters, is the gospel. The father cuts off part three of the son's speech.

[28 : 11] God will not hear it. We can say it all we want, but it is irrelevant. God will not hear part three of this speech. God will not let us offer to make up for our sin. God will not let us try to pay the debt.

How could we anyway? How could we anyway? God will not let us offer to earn our way back. We do it all the time, though, don't we?

Don't leave me out here alone. We do it all the time, don't we? I do it all the time. We get busy doing all kinds of good deeds. We get all involved in religious ritual.

When we sin, we feel guilty. This is what I do. I feel guilty and miserable for days, and I feel, if I feel more guilty, he'll be more pleasing. The father interrupts before he can give part three, for there's nothing that the son can do but come home.

That's all God wants is just come home. Just come to our senses, turn around, and come home. Now, I said part three of the son's speech is cut off by the father's speech.

[29 : 17] And what the father says in this speech is another surprise. Everyone expects something like, go get a shower, kid. Okay? Will you go get cleaned up? But not the father that Jesus knows.

Verse 22, he says, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. The best robe is the father's robe. Can you imagine that? This prodigal son is going to now enter the village and attend a party wearing the father's robe.

What a picture of God. The father dresses the prodigal son. The living God clothes us unholy ones with his holiness. He covers my rags with his glory.

There's more. Quick. Put a ring on his finger. You see, the ring is the so-called signet ring. This is the ring with which the father sealed all of his official documents. When the father wanted to do official business, he used this ring.

My goodness. You see what Jesus is saying? The son who squandered one-third of the family wealth is now given authority to manage the wealth that is left.

[30 : 27] Oh, my. You mean, Jesus, that sinners are really going to be leaders in the kingdom of God? You mean you're really going to entrust the management of the ministry of the kingdom to sinners?

There's more. Quick. Put sandals on his feet. You see, slaves went barefoot. Kids don't go barefoot. They wear shoes. Put shoes on it. There's more. Quick. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Oh, my. The fattened calf is reserved for the most special guest. The highest honor that can be extended in that culture is to butcher the calf for the guest.

Sinners and tax collectors worthy of butchering the calf. Honored guests at a meal of the Holy One. There's more. Quick. Let's have a feast.

Let's celebrate for this son of mine was dead. He's come alive. He was lost and he's found. Jesus paints the picture here of a rejoicing father, of a feast-making God who celebrates the homecoming of repentant sinners.

[31 : 28] Everything the father does in this parable is unexpected and culturally scandalous just as Jesus' treatment of sinners and tax collectors is unexpected and religiously scandalous.

Jesus defends his scandalous actions by the even more scandalous claim that in him, the Holy One, the Holy Father, is welcoming sinners and eating with them. In Jesus, the Holy One embraces sinners while they're still sinners.

The Holy One risks the divine reputation in order to embrace sinners. Scandalous love. The love of one who only acts in ways that honors his name.

Here then is the good news. The good news that every person on this planet longs to hear. In the incarnation, the living God lifts the hem of his robe and runs toward lost sons and daughters.

In the cross, the living and Holy One takes upon himself all the shame of the unholy and rejoices when he does it. So what if some religious folk think that God thereby tarnishes his reputation?

[32 : 44] All that matters is that lost sons and daughters came home. Besides, this now is the reputation. This now is the great name that the Holy One wants to have in the world.

This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Brothers and sisters, this parable is teaching us that it is safe to come home.

It doesn't matter what you have done or not done. It doesn't matter what you have done or not done since the last time you heard this story. It's safe to come home.

Just turn around and come home. Oh sure, sure, some older brothers and sisters are going to hassle us. Some of them are going to demand that we measure up first but that's because they don't know the Father's heart.

They will in time. And besides, their opinion doesn't matter. The only opinion is that of the Father. And the only begotten Son of the Father is telling us that it is safe to come home.

[33 : 50] He ought to know. He is the one who has lived in the Father's heart from all eternity. The one who comes from the Father's heart. He is the one who goes to the cross to take upon Himself the shame of the world so that it is possible to come home.

Why do you think the Son of God dies in the posture He does? Why do you think He chose that form so that when He died His arms are outstretched?

It's because the outstretched arms of the Son are the outstretched arms of the Father. And I'm telling you it is safe to come home. It does not matter what you have done or not done.

The Father's heart is open wide and He embraces us with scandalous love. This man welcomes sinners and He eats with them.

who will go into He eats with them and he sees that He takes love, he keeps us to the God that he eats with us.