

Scandalous Love

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- [0 : 0 0] I think I've mentioned it before that Michael Green of British Columbia says that the job of the preacher is to now explain to the people what they've experienced during worship.
- We've been experiencing something very powerful, and Mary, thank you, and Susie, thank you for leading us in worship this morning. And before I preach, I want to thank the young people for staying today.
- It is just really great to have senior high and junior high disciples with us, and it's especially great knowing what's going on in the youth ministry. I think Tim shared a couple of weeks ago, I think, Tim, you said that you have not seen in your years of youth ministry what's been happening this summer, is that correct?
- And a powerful work of the Holy Spirit. Last Wednesday night, a number of us parents of junior highs came on time at 8.30 to get our kids, and we waited outside until about 20 after 9.
- And as we went to the door, we were told they can't come out yet because they decided to stick around and pray. Junior high kids wanted another hour to pray, and in that context, seven junior high kids gave their lives to Christ.
- [1 : 1 1] I mean, something's happening. It's very powerful. And my job now is to tell us a little bit about what is behind that. Our text today is the same text we had last Sunday.
- It's Luke chapter 15. And many people have called Luke 15 the gospel within the gospel. The gospel within the gospel. Because here we have God's good news for the world in its purest form, especially in the parable of the prodigal father.
- The parables that Jesus teaches in Luke 15 grab hold of human souls in any cultural setting. That's their power.
- But when they are understood in their Middle Eastern and Asian cultural setting, in the cultural setting in which Jesus originally taught them, they really come alive in a new way.
- And I want to show you again how. Hear the word of God. Luke 15, verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.
- [2 : 1 9] And the Pharisees and scribes murmured. They murmured, saying, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.
- So Jesus told them this parable. He goes on then to tell them the parable of the shepherd and his lost sheep, the parable of the woman and her lost coin, and the parable of the father and his lost son.
- Let us pray. Spirit of the living God, you have already been speaking to us today. I sense that you have already been working this message deep into our soul.
- And I pray now in your grace and mercy that you would cause these very familiar words to come alive in our hearts and minds as never before. For we pray this in Jesus' name.
- Amen. As I said last Sunday, whenever we study and reflect on the parables in Luke 15, we need to keep two facts in mind. Two facts in mind.

[3 : 22] The first is that Jesus told these stories in response to the accusation of scribes and Pharisees. We won't understand this story unless we realize that. He is speaking to the accusation given against him by the scribes and the Pharisees.

The scribes are the professional theologians of the day. They are the ecclesiastical lawyers. They were responsible for protecting Israel's law and the reputation of Israel's God.

The Pharisees were the dedicated lay leaders of Israel. They were committed to keeping the law, and they were committed to keeping the 631 other rules and regulations that had been built up around the law as a fence.

They thought that if the people would keep these 631 other rules and regulations, they would end up keeping the basic Ten Commandments. They would therefore be pleasing to God, and then they would receive God's blessing.

Together, the scribes and the Pharisees were the self-appointed guardians of the reputation of Israel's law and of Israel's God. They were zealous to protect the name of the holy God.

[4 : 30] Say that again. It's so crucial for grasping what Jesus is doing here. They were zealous to protect the name of the holy God. That's a very praiseworthy motive.

And as far as the scribes and Pharisees were concerned, Jesus of Nazareth was shaming that reputation. That's the problem the scribes and Pharisees had with Jesus fundamentally, that he was shaming the reputation of the holy God.

How? How? By the way, he was interacting with sinners and tax collectors. Sinners and tax collectors were flocking to Jesus.

They could sense that there was something different about this rabbi. They wanted to be near Jesus. And scandal of scandals, Jesus wanted to be near them.

Be near is a mild way of putting it. Luke says Jesus welcomed them. And this word welcome means to welcome as a brother or a sister.

[5 : 31] Get the picture in mind. Jesus is welcoming sinners and tax collectors as though they were members of his own family. And Luke says he was eating with them.

In Middle Eastern cultures and in Asian cultures, to eat a meal with another person is a sacramental act. To eat a meal with another person signals total, unreserved acceptance.

Jesus was accepting these sinners and tax collectors just as they were. And the scribes and Pharisees were horrified. And so they leveled the accusation against Jesus, this man welcomes sinners and he eats with them.

To their mind, his behavior is scandalous. And to their mind, his behavior is bringing shame upon Israel's God.

Sadly, the scribes and Pharisees did not realize that in their accusation, they were preaching the gospel. Jesus Christ, the Holy One of Israel, welcomes us unholy sinners.

[6 : 39] Jesus Christ, the Holy One of Israel, eats with us, accepting us just as we are. Oh, he's not going to leave us just as we are. Thank God. He's going to change us and transform us.

But he begins by receiving us and embracing us in total acceptance just as we are. This man welcomes sinners and he eats with them.

They say it out of disgust and anger. Jesus responds to the accusation of the scribes and Pharisees then by telling the parables recorded in Luke 15.

That's the first thing to keep in mind. The second fact to keep in mind when reading and reflecting on Luke 15 is even more important than the first. And it is that through these parables, Jesus is painting a portrait for us.

He's painting a portrait of the character and nature of the living God. He's painting a picture of the holy God whose reputation the scribes and Pharisees were so zealous to protect.

[7 : 42] Through the interaction of the shepherd with his sheep, through the interaction of the woman with her coins, and through the interaction of the father with his sons, Jesus is painting a picture of who God is and what God is like.

And we can trust this picture. We can trust this picture because the painter, the storyteller, is the only begotten son of the father. He is the one who knows the father's heart.

He is the one who has always lived in the father's heart. He is the one who comes from the father's heart. Now, the irony is that when Jesus opens up the father's heart through these parables, he makes the scandal worse, especially in the parable of the prodigal father.

I submit to you that part of the reason Jesus of Nazareth was crucified was because of this parable. Luke 15, verse 11.

And Jesus said there was a man who had two sons. Two sons. This tells me that we will not understand Jesus' point in this parable until we deal with the interaction between the father and the second son.

[8 : 55] Now, before we do that, which is what we're going to do today, before we do that, let me quickly review the interaction between the father and the younger son. The younger son breaks his father's heart.

Verse 12. By requesting his share of the family inheritance before his father dies. In that culture, that request was tantamount to wanting his father to die.

Let's just pretend you're dead. Okay, Dad, and give me the money. The father surprisingly gives him the money. The father gives the younger son one-third of the family wealth.

The son goes and turns his inheritance into cash and heads off to the far country. And there he squanders everything. One-third the family wealth. Fortunately for this young brother, a famine hits in the far country.

As I said last week, thank God it does not go well in the far country. Thank God it does not go well when we try to run away from the father. Thank God it does not go well. Thank God it does not go well.

[9 : 55] Thank God. Things became so bad for him that he ended up feeding pigs and would have eaten what he was feeding the pigs. Jesus says in verse 17, the younger son finally came to his senses.

He remembers how good his father is. He remembers that the father is generous toward his hired hand, so the younger son decides to go home. Now, as I tried to show you last Sunday, going home was a big gamble for this young boy.

Culturally, this was a huge risk. He knows all too well what is going to await him when he goes home. He's going to hit the taunting and humiliation of the villagers. He's going to meet the hostility and furor of the village elders.

He is going to meet the scorn of his older brother. And he expects that he's going to meet the anger and rejection of his father. But since he's desperate by this point, he decides to take all that and head home.

He goes home now hoping that he will be treated as one of the father's hired servants. Verse 19, Make me one of your hired servants. That would be grace enough in this young boy's eyes.

[11 : 02] That would be grace enough. He realizes that what he has done has shamed his father. He realizes that what he has done has made him no longer worthy to be a son. He realizes that the father has the right to turn him away.

The father has the right to forgive him. The father has the right to punish him. Well, when he arrives at the village gates, he is overwhelmed by a series of surprises.

As I tried to show last Sunday, everything the father does in his interaction with the younger son is culturally unexpected and culturally scandalous.

Everything the father does is scandalous in this. The father has been waiting. No one expected him to be waiting. Longing for the son's return. When the father sees the son, the father runs toward him.

That's a shameful act for a man of his age and stature. The father embraces the son, even while the son is still in his filthy rags. Another shameful act.

[12 : 01] The father then kisses the son, even while the son is still dirty and unclean. Scandalous behavior. In those acts, the father is taking on himself the shame of his son.

And whatever it was that the villagers and the elders and the older brother wanted to do to this young boy, they must now do to the father. Well, the surprises continue.

Verse 22. The father will not listen to the young son's request to be treated as a hired servant. He won't even let him say that part of his speech. Instead, the father orders that the servants put a robe on the son.

The robe is the best robe, the father's robe. Put a ring on his finger. It's the signet ring. It's the ring the father uses to seal all of his documents. Put shoes on his feet. That's the symbol of sonship. Kill the fattened calf, because this is the gesture of hospitality given to the most honored guests.

Let's have a party and celebrate this homecoming. In the first half of the parable, then, Jesus tells scribes and Pharisees that the God whose reputation they are so zealous to protect is the God who embraces repentant sinners and parties with them.

[13 : 13] The Holy One risks the divine reputation in order to welcome lost sons and daughters, which is why I've been calling this parable the parable of the prodigal father. If anyone's prodigal in this text, it's the father.

Everything he does is culturally unexpected. It's culturally scandalous. Jesus is revealing a waiting, suffering, running, sinner-embracing, sinner-kissing, sinner-dressing, shame-taking on father.

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Can I get a couple of woes or amens or something? That's good news. Now, let's move into the interaction between the father and the older son.

Luke 15, verse 25. Luke 15, verse 25. Now, his older son was in the field. The word older or elder in this text is the word *presbyteros*, from which we Presbyterians get our name.

And my friend Dale Brunner says that whatever else the second part of the story teaches, it teaches that God even loves Presbyterians. The older son is the son in the family who needs to only be told once to make his bed.

[14 : 32] The older son is the one who never needs to be told not to burp at dinner. The older son represents the scribes and the Pharisees. And the older son represents most of us in this room.

We have not gone off to the far country. We have not squandered the father's wealth. We have sought to be faithful and obedient. We have tried to carry out our duties.

Now, what we discover in the second half of the parable is that although the older son does not go to the far country, the older son nevertheless breaks his father's heart.

We discover, therefore, that there are two kinds of sinners. There are law breakers and there are law keepers. And they both stand in need of grace.

The older son comes from the field where he has been dutifully carrying out his responsibilities. He hears music and dancing coming from the father's house. And what's his first response?

[15 : 39] What's the oldest son's first response? It's, oh, wow, like totally. My dad's happy. Something good has happened to him. He's having a party. I'm going to go find out what made my father so happy. Not.

That's not his first response. His first response is suspicion. There's something wrong with this picture right from the beginning, isn't there?

Suspicion. He calls one of the boys who's been playing out in front of the father's house and asks him what's going on. And the boy tells him the good news or what ought to have been good news. Verse 27, your brother has come back and your father has killed the fattened calf because he's received him back safe and sound.

Jesus says, verse 28, the older son became very angry. Angry. Why angry?

Angry. Because the younger son has shamed the name of the father, the name of the village, the name of the family, and he is not being punished.

[16 : 50] He's not being asked to measure up. You see, for scribes and Pharisees, repentance, without which no one can be saved, repentance means conformity to the rules.

You can come back into the fold if and when you measure up to the rules. This son comes back and he's welcomed into the father's house before he measures up.

In fact, the young son isn't even promising to measure up. For Jesus, however, repentance is something very different. Repentance is coming to one senses.

Repentance is realizing my sinfulness and my unworthiness. And repentance is coming home and banking on the mercy and grace of God. The older son is so angry now because his whole view of religion is being turned upside down.

But what makes him so angry, what makes him so angry, is that the father himself has brought further shame on the father's name? The music and the dancing, the killing of the fattened calf is all for the prodigal son.

[18 : 02] And that's too much for the older son to handle. So Jesus says in verse 28, the older son was not willing to go in. Or as some other versions translate it, the older son refused to go in.

Underline the phrase, not willing to go in. Not willing to go in. Why underline that? Get this.

In not going in, in refusing to go into the party, the older son, who's so concerned to defend his father's reputation, insults his father.

Why does this shame his father? Here again, I'm indebted to the work of Dr. Kenneth Bailey. He points out that in a Middle Eastern culture, the children are expected to be present when a party is thrown for an honored guest.

That's the case in the Philippines, right? We have some guests from the Philippines today. Whenever I would go to someone's home, all the children were expected to be there because I was the honored guest.

[19 : 07] The oldest son in particular is expected to move around the party, offer compliments, make sure everyone has enough to eat. In short, he's supposed to be the host. By refusing to go into the party, the older son, who's so concerned about the father's name, shames him.

Furthermore, the oldest son is expected to serve the honored guest as the servant. This was symbolic gesture by which the father of the house would say, you're so important to me, my older son will serve you.

No wonder the older son doesn't want to go into the house. The father has made the younger son the honored guest. And the older son is to come in and serve the younger son.

There's more to the cultural background. The older son now is expected to embrace the honored guest and hand out compliments. He won't go in and do it.

Shaming the father. Are you with me? Now, here's the most shameful act, though. If a son disagrees with his father, he is never to reveal that publicly.

[20 : 20] Right, bears? Never reveal it publicly. That's probably true in Scandinavian countries, too. At least it was in my household. The son disagrees. He's supposed to enter the party, carry out his duties, and then after all the guests are gone, he can pull his father aside and express his disagreement.

By staying outside, the older son has publicly disobeyed his father. He has publicly shamed his father. You see, the father butchered the fattened calf.

And all of the village people are there, all the important leaders. And in front of all of them, the older son shames the father. You can see, then, that the older son has also broken his father's heart, perhaps at a deeper level.

Now, Jesus teaches this parable to reveal the heart of the holy God. How does the father in this story respond to all of this insulting behavior?

You ready? He responds just as scandalously as he did with the first son. Everyone expects the father to ignore the son or in some way to punish him for his public insolence.

[21 : 33] But what does the father portrayed by Jesus do? Verse 28, Jesus says, the father came out. Surprise.

Surprise. The father comes out of the house. For the second time that day, he comes out of the house toward his sons, thereby publicly humiliating himself.

And he goes out not to criticize the older son, not to condemn him for his insolence. He goes out and takes on the shame of the older son upon himself.

If the first half of the parable says that God the father will take on the shame of the lawbreakers, the second half says that God the father will even take on the shame of the law keepers.

The father loves both sons. God's scandalous love is for sinners and tax collectors and it's for scribes and Pharisees. What a picture of the holy God Jesus is painting for us.

[22 : 34] The father goes out to the older son and pleads with him to see life from his perspective. The picture that's painted by the Greek word there is one that the father is not facing him face to face.

The picture is that he goes out to the son, puts his arm around the son, and both of them are looking the same direction and the father pleads with the son to see it from his perspective.

Now, how does the older son respond to this scandalous behavior of his father? The younger son was humbled by it and let the father love him. What does the older son do? You ready?

Can you guess what the older son's going to do now? He further insults his father. He further insults his father. And this we see in his speech.

Remember that the younger son has a speech when he came home. Well, the older son has a speech while he was staying home. Listen very carefully. It's in verses 29 and 30. This speech reveals how far the older son has wandered from the father's house while staying home.

[23 : 44] Listen carefully. Verse 29. Look. All these years I have been serving you and never disobeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat that I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours who has squandered your prosperity with prostitutes comes home, you killed the fattened calf for him. Oh, how those words stab the heart of his father. Notice how he begins that speech.

He begins with the word look. Look. Now think about that culturally. There's no title of respect. Just this look. The younger son, when he wants to break his father's heart, at least had the dignity to say to him, father.

Father. But the older son does not even say father. Just this finger in the father's face and this look. And so Kenneth Bailey says, the younger son was a rebel and he knew it.

The older son is a rebel and does not know it. Imagine. Imagine. The father comes out to plead with him. And all he gets from the older son is this look.

[24 : 54] There's more to the insult. The older son now reveals that the father and the father's friends are not his friends. Did you see that? You never gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends.

Well, son, the whole village is here. You're saying these people are not your friends? The son has inadvertently revealed that though he hung around the place, he was never home.

The Arab scholar Ibrahim Saeed writes this. Thus, the older son is no better than the prodigal son who took his portion and traveled to the far country. The difference between them is this.

The prodigal son was an honorable sinner in that he was perfectly open to his father. He told the father what was in his heart. But the older brother was a hypocritical sinner because he hid his feelings in his heart.

He remained in the house all the while despising his father. There's more. The older son attacks his brother and thereby his father.

[25 : 58] He accuses the younger son of squandering everything on prostitutes, which he can only assume. And implicitly is then saying to the father, look, you don't know what's going on, dad.

You haven't got a clue about this son. If you knew this son better, you wouldn't welcome him back. He doesn't love you. If he loved you, he wouldn't have squandered the wealth. He would have saved it for your retirement. He doesn't love you.

You don't know what's going on. The older son is insulting the father's intelligence and his ability to see things clearly. But the most painful insult of all is the line in verse 29.

All these years I have been serving you. All these years I have been serving you.

Do you hear him? He is saying that he thinks his relationship with the father is based on keeping the rules. If he kept the rules and did what was right, then he had a relationship.

[26 : 56] But what kind of a relationship is that? It's not parent-child. It's what? Master-slave. Do you see the tragedy of this? All those years the older son has missed the point.

Like so many of us older sons and daughters. I'm the oldest. I know. We miss the point all the time. The younger son came home with a speech.

Remember? It had three parts. The younger son. You remember it had three parts? The third part of the younger son's speech was, Make me to be one of your hired servants. He was going to try to get back in the graces of the father by serving.

Are you getting the tragedy of this story? The older brother has been serving part three of the younger brother's speech all of his life. I've served you all my life.

He stayed home. He never went to the far country. But he never knew the father's heart. The father doesn't want servants.

[28 : 05] The father wants children. Children. Well, everything the older brother does then insults his father. It's wounding his father at a deep level.

How then does the father portrayed by Jesus respond to this further insult? You should be ready by now. He responds scandalously. Again, everyone in that culture expects the father to be furious.

But instead, the father, again, humiliates himself before the village. The father could have ordered the older son, Get in there and do your duty. But what would he have gained by that?

So the father, again, pleads with the older son. Verse 31. My son, says the father. This word translated son, by the way, is a very tender and affectionate word.

It's the word *technon*. And you should translate it, my child, my child, my child. It's a more tender and affectionate word than the word the father used of the younger son. That's because older sons and daughters regularly need a little extra encouragement of their belovedness.

[29 : 10] I know of what I speak. My child, my child. The father continues in verse 31. You are always with me. And everything I have is yours.

The father assures the older son of his status and his rights. The homecoming of the younger son is not going to endanger any of the rights of the older son.

This tells me that God the father is full of grace. Full of grace. When he gives grace to someone else, he doesn't take it away from me. There's grace to go around. Grace for younger sons and grace for older sons and daughters.

And then the father finally opens his heart to the son in verse 32. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and now he's alive.

He's lost and is found. Here Jesus reveals the pleading father. The father who pleads with his children to come into his joy.

[30 : 09] Well, if the message to the younger son is come home, the message to the older son is come in.

Come in. Come in to the father's heart. Can you feel the tragedy of this second part of the story? All those years, the older son thought he was in the father's house because he was so good, so faithful, so obedient.

So when the younger son gets to come home freely without having to serve a while, without having to measure up to the rules, the older brother is jealous and angry. Scribes and Pharisees think that their relationship with God is based on their performance and their character.

Therefore, they demand that sinners and tax collectors relate to God on the same basis, on performance and character. When you and I begin to think that we are in the family of God, that we are in the kingdom of God because we earned it, we are going to subtly, if not overtly, demand other people to earn their way in too.

But we did not earn it. Hear the words of the pleading father. My child, my child, thank you for all of your service.

[31 : 35] Thank you for being on the session. Thank you for being a deacon. Thank you for teaching Sunday school. Thank you for ushering. Thank you for tithing.

Thank you for all of your service. Thank you for your desire to be holy. But that is not why. You're my child. You're my child simply because I love you.

That's all. Amen? In his book, *The Dynamics of the Spiritual Life*, Dr. Richard Lovelace shows that the older brother syndrome is very alive in the church.

Lovelace writes this. Many professing Christians draw their assurance of acceptance with God, draw their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance, or their relative infrequency of conscious willful disobedience.

But few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Martin Luther's platform. You are accepted. Looking outward in faith and claiming the holy, alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground of assurance.

[32 : 58] I am in the family of God. For only one reason. The Father has come out of the house, and in the only begotten Son, He has taken on all of my shame and welcomed me with scandalous love.

There is no other reason why I am in. Well, what are we going to do now today? In response to this word that we have heard.

Younger brothers and sisters, you who have gone to the far country, come home. I'm telling you, it is safe to come home. The Father is waiting. He will run to you.

He will embrace you. And He will cover you with His own robe. It's safe. Older brothers and sisters, you who have been in the house and in the field, lo these many years, come in.

The Father is pleading. Come in to my heart. Let me love you just because I love you. Let me be the kind of Father I am to you. I am sure as you have worked through this parable, you recognize that the parable ends in midair, so to speak, doesn't it?

[34 : 23] There is no closure to the parable. It doesn't end. And we are left wondering, what will the older son do now in response to this outpouring of his father's heart?

How should the parable end? Well, in light of the cultural setting, there are only two possible endings to this parable. The one finds the older son humbling himself.

The one finds the older son realizing that he has strayed from the father's heart, that he has missed the point. And that in his insistence on holiness, he is actually rebelling against the father's heart.

And he is insulting the father. And so one ending of the parable finds the older son giving in and letting the father love him scandalously.

The other possible ending is the more likely one. And it is that it finds the older son hardening his heart. This ending finds the older son deciding that he must now vindicate the name of the family which the father has shamed.

[35 : 41] And so Kenneth Bailey cautiously speculates, is not this the end of the story? The older son in great anger took his stick and he beat his father to death.

I tried this on the people in northern Philippines, the Ifagal people, when I was preaching at a conference. And I asked the elders, they were sitting in the front row like the elders and deacons are today, and I said, how should this story end?

And they wouldn't answer. They wouldn't answer. I was doing this through a Wycliffe translator. He wouldn't give me an answer. How should this story end? And finally, the Wycliffe translator pointed to the head elder, Francis, and said, Francis, you're going to shame Mr. Johnson unless you give an answer.

That's a dirty, dirty thing to do. Francis is now obligated, big time. Francis stands up and he can hardly talk, looking down, and he mumbles.

And then the translator asked him to finish. And in great intensity, that Ifagal elder said, the older son in great anger would take a stick and beat his father.

[36 : 53] Is that not what the scribes and Pharisees ended up doing? They could not handle Jesus' portrayal of the Holy One's heart.

So in the name of holiness, they killed the Holy One's revelation of his own heart. The accusation, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them, gave way to crucify, crucify, crucify him.

And they killed the embodiment of the father's heart. And then from the cross comes one more scandalous word.

Father, forgive them. Because they don't know what they're doing.