

More Scandalous Love!

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Date: 03 November 2013

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[0 : 00] We have today the great privilege we had last Sunday of listening to Jesus of Nazareth as he tells what many people consider to be the greatest story ever told.

It is recorded for us in the 15th chapter of the gospel according to Luke the physician. As I pointed out last Sunday, many people consider Luke 15 to be the gospel within the gospel.

And rightly so. Because in this text we have the gospel, the good news in its purest form, so to speak. Especially in the parable usually called the parable of the prodigal son.

Which we will see today should be, must be called the parable of the prodigal sons. And which we will see is even more accurately called the parable of the prodigal father.

Now, these stories have redemptive effect in any cultural setting. But they really come alive and do their redemptive work when they're heard in the context in which Jesus first spoke them.

[1 : 15] In the Middle Eastern cultural context. If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of really good, good news.

Luke 15 verses 1 to 2 and then verses 11 through 32. Hear the word of God. Now, all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near Jesus to listen to him.

Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. Jesus said to them, A man had two sons.

The younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me. So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered together everything and went on a journey into a distant country.

And there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now, when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country. And he began to impoverish. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country.

[2 : 22] And he sent him into his fields to feed swine. He would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating. And no one was giving him anything to eat.

But when he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread and I'm dying here with hunger? I will get up, go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.

I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired men. So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his slaves, Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet and bring the fattened calf. Kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead, has come to life again. He was lost and has been found.

- [3 : 34] And they began to celebrate. Now, his older brother was in the field. And when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.
- He summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. The servant said to him, Your brother has come. Your father has killed the fattened calf because he received him back safe and sound.
- But he became angry and was not willing to go in. And his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, Look, for so many years I've been serving you.
- I've never neglected a command of yours. Yet you have never given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours comes, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him.
- And the father said to him, Son, you've always been with me. And all that is mine is yours. We had to celebrate and rejoice.
- [4 : 42] For this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found. The word of the Lord. Living God, we believe that you enabled Luke to accurately write down these words of the Lord Jesus.
- And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would cause us to enter into the reality of which these words speak as never before, for we pray it in Jesus' name.
- Amen. As I said last Sunday, whenever we read and reflect on the parables in Luke 15, we need to keep two truths in mind.
- Two truths. First, Jesus told these stories in response to accusations against him by scribes and Pharisees.
- Together, scribes and Pharisees are the self-appointed guardians of the reputation of Israel, Israel's law, and Israel's God. They were zealous to protect the name of the holy God, a most worthy ambition.
- [6 : 05] But as far as they were concerned, Jesus of Nazareth was bringing shame on that name and thereby putting Israel at the risk of losing God's blessing.
- You see, sinners and tax collectors were flocking to Jesus. They could tell there was something different about this rabbi. They wanted to be near him. And scandal of scandals, Jesus wanted to be near them.
- Be near is putting it mildly. Jesus received them. The word means welcome them as brothers and sisters. Jesus was making these sinners and tax collectors members of his own family, ghastly.
- And Jesus was eating with them, double ghastly. In the Middle Eastern culture, to eat a meal with another person is almost a sacramental act. It's an act signifying total, unreserved acceptance.
- Jesus was accepting sinners and tax collectors just as they are, without reservation. And the scribes and Pharisees are horrified. They level the accusation, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.
- [7 : 13] They say it out of disgust and anger because in their mind, this behavior is shameful. And through it, Jesus is shaming the name of Israel and Israel's law.
- And Jesus is shaming the name of Israel's God. Shame on you, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus responds to this accusation by telling the stories in Luke 15.
- The second fact to keep in mind when we are reading and reflecting on the stories is even more important. Through these stories, Jesus is painting a portrait. A portrait of the living God.

He's painting a picture of this holy God whose reputation scribes and Pharisees are so zealous to protect. Through the interaction of the shepherd with his sheep, the woman with her coin, and the father with his sons, Jesus is painting a picture of who this holy God is and what this holy God is like.

And we can trust the portrait. For the painter is the only begotten of the father. The storyteller is the one who knows the father's heart.

[8 : 23] He has lived in that heart from all eternity and he comes to us out of that heart. Now as we began to see last Sunday, when Jesus tells these stories opening up the holy one's heart, especially in the parable of the prodigal of the two sons, he only heightens the scandal.

He makes things worse for himself, precipitating a crisis that leads to his crucifixion. Luke 15 verse 11.

Jesus says, there was a certain man who had two sons. Two sons. This tells us that we are not going to understand the message of this whole story until we consider the interaction between the father and the older son.

Now before we do that though, let me quickly review the interaction between the father and the younger son. The younger son breaks his father's heart.

He breaks his father's heart by requesting his share of the family inheritance before his father dies. Now in that culture, that's tantamount to wishing the father dies.

[9 : 37] The father surprisingly grants the request. The father gives the son one third of the family wealth. The son turns his inheritance into cash, heads off to the far country where he squanders everything.

One third of the family inheritance. Now fortunately for him, a famine hits that country. And he is in need. Things become so bad for him that he ends up feeding the pigs and longing to eat what the pigs are eating.

Jesus says, verse 17, that the younger son finally comes to his senses. He comes to his senses because he remembers how good his father is.

He remembers that his father is so generous even to his hired men. So the younger son decides to go home. Now as I tried to show you last Sunday, that would involve a big gamble, a huge risk.

For he knows all too well what is awaiting him when he crosses into the village gates. He knows he's going to face the taunting and humiliation by the villagers. He knows he's going to face the hostility and furor of the village elders.

[10 : 48] He knows he's going to face the scorn of the younger brother. And he expects the anger and rejection of his father. But since he's desperate, he's going to endure all of that.

He heads home hoping that he might be treated as one of the father's hired men. As we pointed out last week, the son has a speech.

And in the speech there are three parts. And the third part is, verse 19, make me as one of your hired men. That would be grace enough for this young man.

He realizes that he has sinned against God and against his father. He realizes he has no claim to sonship. He realizes the father has every right to refuse to see him when he comes home.

When he arrives at the village gates, he is overwhelmed by a series of incredible surprises. Everything, I underscore that word everything again.

[11 : 51] Everything, everything, how much of it? Everything. Everything that the father does in relationship to the younger son is culturally unexpected.

Everything is unexpected and it is culturally scandalous. The father has been waiting, longing for his son to come home. When the father sees the son, he runs toward him.

A shameful act for a man of his age and stature. The father then embraces the son while the son is still in his filthy rags. Another shameful act.

And then the father kisses the son while the son is still dirty. He kisses the son. Another shameful act. This is all scandalous behavior. And in all of that, it's the father's way of transferring the shame that rests on his younger son unto himself.

And now, whatever it was that the villagers, the elders, and the older son wanted to do to the younger son, they must now do to the father. The surprises continue.

[12 : 56] Verse 22. The father will not listen to the younger son request to be treated as a hired man. Indeed, the father orders the servants to put a robe on him.

It's the father's robe. It's the best robe. To put a ring on his finger. It's the signet ring. The symbol of the father's authority. To put shoes on his feet because he's a son and not a slave.

And to kill the fattened calf. The gesture of hospitality given to only the most honored of guests. Let us have a party to celebrate the homecoming of my son.

In the first half of the parable, Jesus tells scribes and Pharisees who are so zealous about the reputation of God that God embraces repentant sinners and parties with them.

The Holy One risks the divine reputation in order to welcome home lost sons and daughters. Which is why I suggest we call the parable the prodigal father.

[14 : 01] Everything the father does is culturally unexpected and scandalous. Jesus is revealing a waiting, suffering, running, sinner embracing, sinner kissing, sinner dressing, shame taking on father.

Okay. Let us now then move into the interaction between the father and the older son. Luke 15 verse 25. Now his older son was in the field.

The word older here is the word *presbyteros* from which *presbyterians* get their name. And as Dale Bruner likes to point out when talking about this parable, this means in the second half of the parable that God even loves *presbyterians*.

Now, the older son in this parable, I think, represents most of us in this room. We've not run off to the far country, at least not very far.

We've not squandered our wealth in loose living. We have sought to be faithful and obedient. We've tried to carry out our duties. Someone has said that the older son is the one who only had to be told once to make his bed and to put the dishes in the dishwasher.

[15 : 20] The older son never needed to be reminded to do his homework or to write a thank you note to his grandmother. Now, what we discover in the second half of Jesus' parable is that although the older son never goes to the far country, he nevertheless breaks his father's heart.

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

The older son comes from the field where he's been dutifully carrying out his responsibilities. He hears music and dancing coming from his father's house and his first reaction is, whoa, like totally, my father is happy.

He's been so sad since my younger brother's been gone and he's happy. He's having a party. I must go to my father's house and discover what this is and enter into the joy, right? No.

That's not his first response. His first response is suspicion. Boy, there's something wrong with this picture, isn't there? He calls one of the boys who's playing in the field outside the house and he asks the boy what's going on and the boy tells him the good news or what should have been good news.

[16 : 40] Verse 27, your brother has come home and your father has killed the fattened calf because he received him back safe and sound. Then Jesus says, verse 28, the older son became very angry.

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

He's not being made to measure up. You see, for scribes and Pharisees, repentance, without which anyone can be saved, repentance means conformity to the rules.

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

He's welcomed into the father's house without even promising to measure up. Jesus, however, knows a different understanding of repentance. For Jesus, repentance means coming to one's senses.

[17 : 47] Repentance means recognizing that I've sinned against heaven and in God's sight. Repentance means coming home and simply banking on the mercy and grace of God.

You see, the older son is so angry because the father himself is upsetting the son's understanding of religion and righteousness.

But what makes the son so angry is that the father himself brings further shame on his own name. How does he do this?

The music and the dancing, the killing of the fattened calf, it's all the father's doing and it's all for the younger son and it's too much for the son to handle. So, says Jesus, verse 28, the older son was not willing to go in.

Or as other versions have it, the older son refused to go into the house. Underline that phrase, unwilling to go in. Underline the phrase, refused to go in.

[18 : 49] Why underlining? Why underlining? Well, get this. Get this. In refusing to go into the house, the older son, who is so concerned for the father's reputation, shames his father.

He's very concerned about the father's reputation, yet in staying outside and not going in, he shames 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 the Middle East, the children are expected to be present at a party, throwing in honor of a guest. I experienced that in the Philippines.

When Sharon and I would go to someone's home, the key members of the family were obligated to be there, even if they didn't want to be there. I remember one Easter Sunday morning when I preached in Seoul, Korea.

Afterwards, the pastor threw a dinner for me, and all four of his sons had to show up there, two of whom I knew didn't really want to be there. The oldest son in particular is expected to move among the guests offering compliments, making sure everybody has enough to eat.

[20 : 00] In short, the older son is to serve as the host. By refusing to come into the house, the older son shames his father in the presence of the whole village who has been invited to the party.

Furthermore, the oldest son is expected to serve the honored guest the meal. This is a symbolic way by which the father says, you are such an important guest that my oldest son is going to serve you.

No wonder the older son doesn't want to go in the house. The father has made the younger son the honored guest, and he's expected. The older son is expected to come and serve his brother.

My goodness. There's more to the cultural background. The older son was expected to come and embrace the honored guest and give the honored guest all kinds of compliments.

He refuses, thereby shaming his father. But here's the most shameful act of all. If a son disagrees with his father, he's never to reveal it publicly.

[21 : 10] Those of you from Asian cultures or Middle Eastern cultures, you know what I'm saying, right? You might disagree with your parents, but you never, ever express that publicly.

The older son should have entered the party, carried out his duties, and then after everybody left, he could then disagree with his father. By staying outside, the older son has publicly disobeyed his father.

He has publicly shamed his father. Because the father has invited the whole village, all the dignitaries, all the important people of the village are there, and the older son now has shamed his father in front of them all.

You can see then that the older son breaks his father's heart, perhaps at an even deeper level than the younger son did.

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

[22 : 11] Ready? Just as he did in his interaction with the younger son, unexpectedly and scandalously. Everyone expects the father to ignore his son or in some way to punish him for his public insolence.

But what does the father portrayed by Jesus do? Verse 28. The father came out. The father came out of the house. The son refuses to go in, and so the father goes out.

For the second time that day, the father goes out of the house and thereby publicly humiliates himself. And he goes out not to condemn the older son, but now to take all the shame that was resting on the older son upon himself.

In the first half of the story, we discover that the father takes on the shame of law-breaking sinners. In the second half, we discover the father takes on the shame of law-keeping sinners.

The father loves both. The father is gracious to sinners and tax collectors and scribes and Pharisees. What a picture of the holy God Jesus is painting. The father goes out to the older son.

[23 : 30] He leaves the party and pleads with his son to see life from the father's perspective, from the perspective of the father's heart. It's the same thing God the father is doing with us.

Please, won't you see human beings from the perspective of my heart? I like how an 11th century scholar comments on this part of the story.

He writes, Look at the heart of this father. It's full of tenderness and love in that he left the banquet, the guests and his younger son, to plead with his older son to come in. It is as if the father's own joy is incomplete as long as one of his children is grieving.

Now, how does the older son respond to this scandalous love of his father? The younger son is humbled by it and comes home. What does the older son do?

What does the older son do? Ready? He further insults his father. In response to this love, he insults his father even more.

[24 : 37] We see this in his speech. Remember, the younger son had a speech. The older son has a speech. It's recorded in verses 29 and 30. Look at it carefully. 29 and 30.

It reveals how far the older son has drifted from his father's house while never leaving the house. Listen. Look. All these years I've been serving 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. All those words stabbed the father's heart. Notice how the older son begins his speech.

Look. Boy, there's no honor there. There's no honorific title. You know, when the younger son was leaving his father, at least he had the decency to say, Father, not the older son, just look.

As Kenneth Bailey says, the younger son was a rebel and he knew it. The older son is a rebel and he doesn't know it. Imagine the father comes out to plead with him and all he gets from his son is, look.

[25 : 53] Now, there's more to the insult. The older son reveals that the father and the father's friends are not his friends. You never gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends.

Wait a minute. Your friends? Like, the whole family is here and the whole village is here.

The older son is revealing how far he has strayed that he's really not part of the family and not part of the village. So, the Arab scholar Ibrahim Saeed writes this.

The older son is no better than the prodigal son who took his portion and traveled into the far country. The difference between them is that the prodigal son was an honorable sinner and that he was perfectly open to his father.

But the elder brother was a hypocritical sinner because he hid his feelings in his heart. He remained in the house all the while hating his father. There's more.

[26 : 55] The older son now attacks his brother and implicitly attacks the father. He accuses the younger son of wasting all the wealth on prostitutes, something he could only deduce, only an assumption.

And he implicitly then calls into question the father's intelligence. Like, like, dad, don't you get it? The kid's a loser. He's always been a loser. He doesn't love you because if he loved you, he would have kept some of that wealth so he could take care of you when you get old.

Instead, he squanders your wealth. So, the son is insulting the father's ability to understand reality. But the most insulting thing of all is the last line of his speech.

Verse 29. All these years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your orders. Do you hear him?

All these years I've served you, I've never disobeyed your orders. All these years I've served you, I've never disobeyed your orders. He is saying that he thinks the relationship with the father is based on keeping the rules.

[27 : 58] As long as he kept the rules, he had a relationship. But what kind of relationship is that? That's not father-son. That's master-slave. Do you see the tragedy here? All those years, the older son missed the point.

He never went to the far country, but he missed the point, as many of us older sons and daughters do. The younger son comes home with a speech, as we pointed out.

And remember that it has three parts. And the third part is, anyone remember? Make me one of your hired men. That's the last thing the younger son wants today.

Say, make me one of your hired men. He thought that he could get in good standing with the father by doing some things, by earning his way in. He discovers it's all a matter of grace.

What a tragedy. The older son has been living the third part of the younger son's speech all his life.

[29 : 03] He stayed home, never went to the far country, but he never knew the father's heart. The father wants children, not workers, not slaves.

Everything the older son does wounds and insults his father. Now, how does the father portrayed by Jesus respond to this wounding and insulting?

Ready? You guessed it. Scandalously. Unexpectedly. 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 demanded that his son do what he has to do, but what would that gain? So the father, again, pleads with the older son. Verse 31. My son, says the father.

This word, by the way, translated son, is a very tender word. It should be better translated, my child. My child. It's more tender than the word the father uses of the younger son.

[30 : 03] More tender towards the older son. I think it's because older brothers and sisters need greater assurance of their belovedness. My child. The father continues.

Verse 31. You're always with me, and everything I have is yours. Always and everything. The father assures the older son of his status and of his rights. The homecoming of the younger son doesn't threaten the status of the older son.

God the father is full of grace, and when he gives grace to someone else, he's not taking it from us. There's plenty of grace to go around for younger and older sons and daughters.

Then the father opens his heart to his son. Verse 32. But we had to celebrate and be glad, for this brother of yours was dead and is alive.

He was lost, and he's come home. Here Jesus reveals this pleading father. The father who pleads for his children to enter into the joy he has in being gracious to sinners.

[31 : 06] Well, if the message to the younger son is come home, the message to the older son is come in. Come in to the father's heart.

You can be at home and not come in to his heart. All those years, the older son thought that he was in the father's house because he was so good and so faithful and so obedient.

So when the younger son comes home and doesn't have to measure up first, the older brother is furious. He's angry. You see, scribes and Pharisees think that their relationship with God is based upon performance and character.

They therefore demand that sinners and tax collectors relate on the same basis, performance and character. Whenever you or I think that we are in the family of God, in the kingdom of God, because we earned it, we will demand that others earned it.

But we did not earn it. Listen to the pleading father. My child, my child, thank you for your service. Really. Thank you for your diligence.

[32 : 14] Really. Thank you for all of your driving, your desire to be holy. Thank you. But that is not why you're in my family. You're in my family because I love you.

There is no other reason. In his classic book, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, Richard Lovelace observes how this older brother syndrome is so rampant in the church.

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

I'm not as bad as the others. Few know enough to start each day with a thorough going stand upon Luther's platform. You are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the holy, alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground of acceptance.

I am in the family of God for only one reason. Only one. The Father has come out to me and in his only begotten Son, taken on my shame and welcomed me in scandalous love.

[33 : 29] There is no other reason why I'm here. So, what are we going to do in response to Jesus' parable? Younger brothers and sisters, you law keepers, come home.

It's safe. Come on home. The Father is waiting and he will embrace you with scandalous love. Older brothers and sisters, you law keepers, come in.

Come on in. Come into the Father's heart. Let the Father love you just because he loves you. Let the Father be the Father. I'm sure you recognize that this parable ends in thin air, so to speak.

There's no conclusion to it. Has that ever troubled you when you've read that? We aren't told what the older brother does in response to this scandalous love. So, how should the parable end?

In light of the cultural setting, there are really only two options as the ending for the parable. The first is that the older son humbles himself. He recognizes that he has strayed from the Father's heart.

[34 : 47] He confesses that and he asks for the Father to just bring him further in and he just, he melts and he gives in to the love of God. The other possible ending finds the older son hardening his heart.

In this ending, the older son decides that he now must vindicate the name of the village, the family, and the father, which the father has shamed.

He now must vindicate the name of the father. So, Kenneth Bailey cautiously speculates, is this not the end of the parable?

So, the older son, in great anger, be his father. I tried that on the Ifagal people of northern Philippines.

I was there for a conference and we were dedicating a new translation of the New Testament, which Wycliffe Bible Translators had done. They'd asked me to come and I did this parable. And I stopped before telling you what Kenneth Bailey had to say.

[35 : 51] And I asked, there were seven elders sitting in the front row, and I asked them, how would you in your village conclude this parable? They wouldn't answer. The translator, Len Newell of Wycliffe, asked them, can you give an answer?

They wouldn't answer. Finally, Len Newell did a culturally inappropriate thing. He said to the lead elder, Francis, he said, Francis, if you don't answer, you're going to shame Reverend Johnson.

Francis looked down, wouldn't answer. Len Newell said, Francis, you have to answer. So, he stood up, head down, holding his stick, and he mumbled something.

Len Newell says, what did you say? He mumbled some more. He says, I can't hear you. And then he spoke up, and Francis took his stick, and he said, the father would take, the older son would take a stick, and he would be his father to death.

Is that not what the scribes and Pharisees end up doing? They could not handle Jesus' portrait of the holy God.

[36 : 58] So, in the name of holiness, they kill the holy one's self-manifestation. The accusation, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them, becomes the cry, crucify him, crucify him, crucify him, and they did.

They kill the embodiment of the love of God. And then, from the cross, one more scandalous word.

Father, forgive them. They do not know what they're doing. 13th and 18th.

14th. 14th. 15th. 15th. 15th. 16 3rd. 16. 16. 13. 17.

16. 17. 17. 17. 36. 17. 18. 18. 18. 18. 30. 17. 18. 18. 18.