

The Religious (Evening Service)

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[0 : 00] Hello, everybody. Good evening. So nice to see you all. My name is Aaron, if you haven't met me. I'm the minister that looks after this service here. So we're in Luke 15, and I know I say this every week, but I really, really love this story. This has been called the parable of the prodigal son, or the lost son.

You've heard it called that, right? The lost son. It's a terrible name for it, actually, because it's not accurate. It's a story of two lost sons. It's a story of two lost sons and an incredibly compassionate father.

So before we get into this parable, let's look at the context, which is why I wanted verses 1 and 2 read. So what was the situation Jesus was in? Okay, so I'll read 1 and 2 again.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. That's Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and he's with them. So Jesus was spending time hanging out with sinners and tax collectors.

So the question is this. Why separate that group out? Like, why is there sinners and tax collectors? What's special about these guys, these tax collectors?

[1 : 17] Well, the thing about the tax collectors is they just weren't any old sinners. They were special sinners. They were special sinners. They were a special category. They were just reviled.

So how it worked is that Rome collected taxes from the Jewish state. But instead of collecting the taxes themselves, they just kind of contracted it out.

So people would bid on the right to collect these taxes. And so Jewish people would go to hear it and they'd say, okay, we bid a million dollars.

We will pay you. I'm just making that number up. But, you know, we'll pay you a million dollars and we'll pay that million dollars up front. And then we'll collect the taxes. Now, anything above a million dollars, though, we get to keep it.

So that's the deal. And the tax collectors were very wealthy individuals because they cheated. They cheated on people. They would make way more than a million dollars.

[2 : 18] And they'd do that by making up new taxes. They'd say, well, there's, you know, frying pans and now I've got a 50% tax on them and stuff. There wasn't really much in the way of a legal recourse here. And they had the power of Rome behind them so they could kind of do what they wanted.

People hated them. In fact, rabbis, who you know about rabbis, were just so concerned with the minutiae of the rules. Rabbis taught that you could lie to tax collectors.

A house was unclean if a tax collector had been in it. And here's Jesus. He's not just ministering to them. He's eating with them.

Table fellowship. It would be like Jesus hanging out with white supremacists in a majority black community. And the Pharisees were thinking, look, we don't mind you hanging out with the poor people, but these guys?

Man. Not these guys. So religious leaders, they hated Jesus for it. And so Jesus told them a parable. A parable of the lost sons.

[3 : 23] And the parable is so wonderful. It's kind of like a parable that exposes the heart of God. It's like what the gospel feels like from God's perspective.

That's what you'd say about this parable, I think. Anyway, so that's context. So let's get into the parable itself. So there's a man who had two sons. And the younger son of them said to his father, The father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.

That's coming to me, right? Now the early listeners of this would have winced at this first line. The younger son is asking for an early inheritance. He asks his father to chop up the ancestral land and give them money.

So I read this Middle Eastern scholar on this. And he'd spend decades in the Middle East. And he would, in the course of his studies, he would interact with lots of people from different stations in life.

And he'd tell people this parable, well, just this first line anyway. And he said, over a 20-year span, the conversation always went like this.

[4 : 27] When he told the person the request of the son to, you know, some peasant in somewhere in the Middle East. So the scholar would say to this person he'd met on the street, he goes, Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?

Never, would be the response every time. Could anyone ever make a request like that? Impossible, everyone would say. If anyone did, what would happen?

The father would beat him, of course. Why? The request means he wants his father to die. See, the son is saying this.

The son is saying, I want your stuff, but not you. See, he wanted the father to give him money, knowing it would ruin the relationship, because he so much desired as independence.

It was a remarkably awful request. I want nothing to do with you. I'd rather you're dead. Just give me the stuff that's going to come to me normally in 20 or 30 years.

[5 : 40] But what's equally surprising about the passage is the response of the father. The father says, yes. And again, the early listeners would have winced at this.

Such a shock. The father said, yes. He carves up the ancestral land. He sells a parcel of it off. He gives it to the son. And in those days, people belonged to the land.

This is just awful. And humiliating for the father, who would have lost standing in the community for doing such a thing. And enduring, you know, just the worst thing that, the worst thing a human can go through is like rejected love.

It's a horrible, horrible thing for the father, but for some reason he did it. So the youngest son walks off the farm with a whole lot of money, an opportunity to live independently, big grin on his face, wanders into, travels to a nearby town, and he's thrown his money around, and everyone loves him, and the prodigal life was good, until one day he wakes up with a hangover.

It's like 11 a.m. on a Tuesday morning, and there's no money left, and a famine has come to the land. So he hires himself out as a worker to a pig farmer, and it says he was so hungry that he just looked longingly at the foods the pigs were eating.

[6 : 57] I mean, what a turnaround. Like, he started off rich, free, independent, big grin on his face, and at the end, basically, and this will sound weird, but he's a Jew and a pigsty.

Like, this is the worst thing that could happen to this guy. So he comes to his senses, and he thinks, man, my father's workers, they were way better off than me.

I'm going to go home and become one of those guys. So he writes this big speech, writes the speech out, and you can imagine him, he's walking home, and he's kind of rehearsing the speech, trying to work out exactly how to phrase every line.

His plan is to become a hired worker. So these folks were, they got paid, but they didn't live on the family land. They lived off in the village somewhere, and he's probably thinking he could pay his father back and restore some honor.

So he's nearing home, and the father sees him and runs to him, which, again, would have been a shock. Nobleman. Fathers didn't do this kind of thing. They didn't hike up their outfits and kind of sprint.

[7 : 58] It's like the queen running. You just can't imagine it, right? It's not something that people would do. It's an undignified thing to do. So the father ran to him and embraced him and kissed him, and the grammar in the Greek suggests that he kept kissing him.

He kissed him and kissed him and kissed him. He was so overjoyed. His son was back. And the younger son starts the speech. Father. Bop, bop, bop, bop, bop, bop. He tries to roll out this restitution plan, but do you notice?

He only gets halfway through the speech. He doesn't get to complete it. The father interrupts him. And by doing so, the father is saying, Son, you have no solution to this problem.

You can't earn your way back, but I will make it right. It's such a wonderful scene. The father says, Bring him my robe and put it on him. And the robe would have been the one the father wore to banquets.

It represented the father's honor and sort of status in the family and in the community. So when the big party gets going, the son is wearing his father's status, his father's honor.

[9 : 07] And it would have been a huge party. There's a fatted calf. And they kill that and they cook it up. Anyway, so the fatted calf is not, that's more than enough food for like a family, right?

I'm from New Zealand. I know about these things. That's going to feed like, that's like 100 people. That calf's going to feed 100 people. So it wouldn't have been just for the workers and the family. It would have been for the whole village.

So the whole village is invited to this big party that the dad's putting on because the son's back. And see, the father, he's reconciled himself to the son, but also he's reconciling the son to the whole community because the son's wearing the robe and the ring and the sandals.

Beautiful story. Now who wouldn't be happy about this, right? Who wouldn't be happy about this? Second half of the parable. The older brother, he's not happy.

The second half of the parable mirrors the first half. And what we learn from the second half is that both sons are lost. It's easy to spot the first son's problems though.

[10 : 15] It's kind of like typical kind of sinful stuff, right? But the oldest brother's sin is just as awful. So let's have a look at it. So the older son, he hears noise. He's supposed to find out what's going on. And the younger brother, younger servant comes back and says, oh, your brother's come back.

The brother refuses to go into the party. And right there, that would have been a slight to the father. As the eldest son, he had a kind of a role to play in these events.

But he refuses to go and he's furious. Now what does the father do? Did you notice that? What does the father do with great grace? The father comes out and greets him. The father comes out and meets him.

Just like he did with the younger son. And the older son rips into him. The older brother, you notice he doesn't call him father. He says, look you. Look you.

Verse 29. He wouldn't speak to the parents like that back in the days. That would have been humiliating for the father. And then he rips into his kind of, his diatribe. You gave him a cow.

[11 : 15] I don't know if you've said that to your father. But you gave him a cow. I couldn't even get a goat for me and my mates. We just wanted to watch the game and eat a goat.

We couldn't even get a goat. And there's this very revealing line. He says, I served you all these years.

The word serve there in the Greek, it means slave. That's how he thought of his relationship with his dad. I slaved. I slaved for you all of these years.

This is where we see that the relationship with a father is broken. He lives with his father, but with the spirit of a slave, not of a son.

And then he talks about his brother. He can't even say his brother's name. He doesn't even refer to his younger brother as my younger brother. He says, that son of yours. And he says to the dad, I never disobeyed you.

[12 : 22] All of these years, he's been counting the years he's been obeying. All these years, I never disobeyed you. I did everything right. You owe me. Father, again, is so gracious.

And he calls him son, which literally means my child, my child, my child. And he tries to help the older son understand this wonderful thing that's happened, that the younger son has returned to him.

And then he assures the older son. He's like, everything of God is yours. Wonderfully gracious response. Then how does the story end? Does it work out?

What's the older son do? How does Jesus end the prayer? We just don't know. It's a cliffhanger. We don't know what happens. But I don't think it's good. So summary so far, what have we got here?

We've got the younger son who was rebellious and estranged whilst in a far off land. And we have the older son who was estranged whilst present in the house.

[13 : 22] Just as sinful as the younger brother. He just left his father without ever leaving the farm. Okay. Step back.

What is Jesus trying to communicate with this parable that's actually a lot more complex than you initially think it is? What's Jesus trying to communicate? Well, the answer is in understanding who the characters are, I think.

So the younger brother, the younger brother represents the tax collectors and the sinners that Jesus was hanging out with, right? The younger brother is the obvious sinner. He's the traditional picture of sin.

He's selfish. He's self-indulgent. He's in the gutter. You know, he's a big target. Easy to point at that guy and go, yeah, look at that guy. The older brother, though, who's that?

Well, that's the Pharisees. Bitter at the grace extended to the younger brother. But just as alienated from the father. But instead of becoming alienated by doing bad things, he was alienated by doing good things.

[14 : 23] The younger brother used the father to get what he wanted. So did the older brother. I never disobeyed me. I never disobeyed you. You owe me.

That was his argument. We become older brothers. We become older brothers when we try and control God by being good. And at that point, Christ is no longer our savior.

We're looking at him purely as our rewarder. That was the older brother's problem. Very sobering, too, I think, at the end of the story. It's the bad son that's saved and the good one that's lost.

It's not how the story is supposed to go, is it? That's not a Hollywood ending. I think this is a great example of why people have such a hard time with the gospel of forgiveness. The story is supposed to be, be good.

God will like you. I've been a good person. When I die, I'll be okay with God. This story destroys that way of thinking. The good son was lost because of his goodness. He wouldn't enter the party.

[15 : 26] He wouldn't be reconciled. Why? Because he said, I have never disobeyed you. I've never disobeyed you. I've always done the right thing. He let his goodness keep him from a right relationship with God.

He considered himself a slave. So that's the younger brother and the older brother. Lastly, who's the father in the parable?

The parable is trying to tell us something wonderful. Now, the father is obviously God. But Jesus presents to the Pharisees a father unlike any father anyone would have known at the time.

Generous and tender and joyful. A father that celebrates his children returning to him.

You know, there are two short parables immediately before this parable. The parable of the lost coin and the lost sheep. And when each one is found in these parables, there's a huge party. A party like in our parable. This will sound weird, but we have a happy God.

[16 : 37] Our God is happy. Particularly happy when his children come back to him. Jesus presents to the Pharisees a father who's a reconciler.

And a reconciler. One who is willing to be humiliated for the sake of that reconciliation. And the cross being, you know, the ultimate, the greatest expression of that.

Okay, let me finish up here. Big picture. Big, big picture now. 10,000 feet. So, we have this chapter. We have Jesus who is hanging out with sinners.

Very serious sinners. Real deal sinners. Tax collectors. Those guys. Not hanging out to be cool. He loves them. And when you catalogue who Jesus spent time with, you think about this, right?

The greedy. The marginalized. The sexually broken. You have to say this. And I want you to really hear me on this. You have to say this.

[17 : 43] No one was more inclusive than Jesus. No one was more inclusive than Jesus. And, but, no one was more intolerant of sin either than Jesus.

No one was more inclusive than Jesus. No one was more intolerant of sin than Jesus. It was the sin that took Jesus to the cross.

He was tolerant of it. He was tolerant of it. We just, you know, God, Jesus would just make a plan. We'll just sweep it under the carpet. No. Jesus had to go to the cross.

You know, one of the great themes of the parable is you are sinners. He's pointing to the tax collectors and he's going, I mean, obviously you guys are sinners.

Well, obviously you guys. But I love you. I want you to come home. That's why I'm hanging out with you. Why I'm being so inclusive with you. But he's pointing to the Pharisees as well. And he's saying, you guys too. See, what he does, and this is why I say no one was more intolerant of sin than Jesus.

[18 : 47] Because he expands the definition of sin. And he says, you guys are all lost. You guys because you're bad. Because you do stupid and selfish things.

And you guys are lost because you think you're good enough. Christ had no tolerance for sin. Which is why he went to such a great lengths to be reconciled.

We're going to take a few minutes now. We're going to get Leo to come up and play for a couple of minutes.

And what I would encourage you to do for these few minutes, two or three minutes, is lean into God. And ask you to pray.

Just think about some of these messages. Because I think they're huge for us. So here are some things you can think on in these next couple of minutes.

[19 : 48] As you spend some time quietly with your Heavenly Father. Who is a reconciler. Generous. Who is willing to be humiliated for you.

Here's some things you can think on. You can think on this. Your Father, our God, is a happy God. Maybe you don't know that about God. He's a happy God. He's a reconciler. Maybe you can think on these things.

Do you have a pretended goodness? That's alienating you from the Father. Is your relationship with the Father more of a slave? Think to God, you owe me.

I'm a good boy. I'm a good girl. Maybe you can think on this. No one was more inclusive than Jesus. And perhaps you could think on how you could manifest that in your life.

Perhaps you could think on this. No one was more intolerant of sin than Jesus. Perhaps you could think on that. So let's spend some time in prayer and reflection.

[20 : 56] If you'd like, you'd ask people around to pray for you as well. And when we're finished, Ed is going to come up and pray for us. Padman, I had to pray for you as well.

Let's pray for you. I'm not wise yet.