

Luke 15:1-32 "A Party-Throwing Church"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me again to Luke 15. Luke 15, last week we began looking at these famous parables about lost things, and we saw the heart of God as a treasure-hunting God who celebrates finding lost sinners in the wreckage of life.

We saw the father of the prodigal son come running to embrace him and to restore his lost son, to throw a party for him, even while he's not even worked off his great debts, while he stands covered in pig filth.

The father celebrates him. I love God's heart in this. I so need, we so need to remember that kind of extravagant love that he has for us.

Even when we fail to love him, when we fail to honor him, that's how he loves us. It should make us draw near to God to listen to him, like it did for the tax collectors and sinners at the beginning of this chapter.

[1 : 22] They drew near to listen to hear what Jesus had to say. But remember, there's a second group around Jesus when he's telling these stories, and they're not necessarily drawing near to listen.

They're grumbling, right? They're not pleased at all with who Jesus has around him. Jesus wants to address their hearts too.

So he brings in the second son to this prodigal son story. We're told when the father sees the prodigal coming home, his heart is one of what? Of compassion.

Verse 20. But in contrast to the father, the older brother's heart, when he hears, is full of anger. Verse 28.

So we've seen God's heart. This week, we must ask, do we share it? Do our lives reflect his treasure-hunting, sinner-loving, repentance-celebrating heart?

[2 : 30] Let's read together the end of the story, and then we'll talk about that. Luke 15 at verse 25. This is God's word. Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.

Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

And he said to him, son, you're always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive.

[3 : 36] He was lost. And is found. Let's pray together. Father, give us your heart. Would we see it again this morning?

We know more of Jesus' love. Change us. Transform us. Make us new by your spirit. As we look at your word, we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. I have very little sense of direction. As a result of which, I've developed what you might call an expertise in being lost.

I've learned a lot about it over the years. In fact, I've learned there are at least two very different ways you can be lost. The first is by heading in the entirely wrong direction.

This is the classic version of how to be lost. I think of a shower that Christy and I were invited to when we first moved to Huntsville. And I had associated this party with one of the host families and took off driving over the mountain to Hampton Cove.

[4 : 43] Only to realize after we had crossed the mountain that it was being hosted at a home in Madison. So there we were, very lost, having gone purposefully in the wrong direction toward the wrong location.

A lot, you might say, like the younger son in this story. But another way to be lost looks very different. A few years ago, I was leading a funeral service a couple of hours out of town.

I had been to this funeral home before and I thought I remembered where I was going. So I took off and drove there and got to town and thought I was in the right place.

But just couldn't see the building that I had pictured in my mind anywhere. So after a few minutes, in order to avoid being late, I pulled off in a parking lot. Parked the car and pulled out my phone to call the funeral home and ask how to get there.

So I sat there talking with the lady and she started to describe what to look for. And sure enough, Arby's across the street. Yet, a car parts store next door.

[5 : 48] Yet, yes, yes. You're, I'm actually in your parking lot right now, aren't I? I am. Yep. Never mind. I'll be in in just a second. You can be parked right nearby, having made all the right turns.

And if you don't recognize where you are, you can still be lost. And this is what we see in the older son, the older brother in our story.

Where do we find him when the party starts? He's not far off somewhere, is he? He's right home in the fields, working. Good kid.

Working hard. Right at home. But we're about to see, even though he's nearby, he has a profoundly distant relationship with his father.

And isn't that the epitome of lostness? To have that distance in his relationship with God? Jesus says it's not about how you're performing.

[6 : 53] It's really about your relationship with God. Look at verse 29. The father comes out to talk to him, and the son says, look. Sound like the respectful, endearing term of address for the head of the household that you love so much?

It's not. It's exactly like what it sounds like in English. And when the father addresses him in verse 31, the father changes for the first time in this story the Greek word for son.

Several times it's been this endearing term for son. Now one that's perhaps more generic. Offspring. My male descendant. There seems to be some distance in the relationship, or at least some question about the relationship.

Last week we noticed three aspects of the willful lostness of the younger brother. But those same things can be true right at home.

Let's see them here. First, determining his own path apart from the father. This older brother says he's never disobeyed. But he won't come into the party, even as his father pleads with him to do so.

[8 : 11] He doesn't like the decision his father has made to kill the fattened calf, does he? Remember, the younger brother has taken his portion of the inheritance and gone off. So now, who's entitled to everything that's left?

All of it is a part of what's coming to the older brother. And he doesn't like any more than the younger brother how the father is managing what will eventually come to him, does he?

He wants to make his own decisions. How about wanting the father's things more than the father? Can't you hear that in his voice? He's earned something being there at home, hasn't he?

Something good, a party like this perhaps, by all his serving, working away dutifully to get. Not enough, apparently.

Finding the father's provision inadequate. Oh, he stayed at home, but apparently not because of his fondness for his father's generosity, right?

[9 : 16] Not even a young goat so that I can have a good time with some friends. His own positive evaluation of himself, his own goodness, as it were, is keeping him from the father even while he lives at home.

It's a huge hindrance to his sharing his father's heart, that gracious, forgiving heart, that heart that embraces a prodigal instead of disowning him. And the older brother says, this son of yours, he's no brother of mine.

Man, I can understand good behavior keeping you from God's heart. I grew up in the church. Always tried to do all the right things.

At least whenever someone would notice what I was doing. That's what really made a big difference to me most of the time. And so grace was this neat thing that I'd heard about and some people needed.

But experientially, grace was kind of hard for me. I have a strong sense of justice. Anyone else in here got a strong sense of justice?

[10 : 30] There are more than that. Raise your hands. Strong sense. Yeah, okay. That can be a great quality. Especially when it drives you to fight for the oppressed and the mistreated.

But it can be devastating when it makes you hate God's gracious heart. Maybe you've felt this before. When you struggle to see forgiveness as anything more than enabling.

Enabling those who haven't performed as well as you. I remember going to class and studying for this exam in seminary. And all the other kids had been skipping school.

They hadn't been going to class. They didn't have to. They hadn't been studying. They were going to use my study guide at the end. And so here came the final exam. And the professor walks in and says, you know what?

I've decided I'm through grading. The exam is canceled. I'm giving you all an A on the final. What? Not fair! After all my work, you're just going to give me an A?

[11 : 30] I was angry. When everyone in the office, even the new hires who aren't pulling their weight yet, get the same bonus. Come on.

Don't you even see all that I'm doing? Does no one notice? All of a sudden, grace becomes hard to stomach, doesn't it? It's like the parable Jesus tells in Matthew.

When the workers who start at different times of day all get the same wage. And the ones who started in the morning say, what? It's not fair! We protest! And the master's response is, do you begrudge my generosity?

Sometimes we begrudge God's grace, His generosity, don't we? And it's our Father's heartbeat.

It's who He is. Oh yes, God is a God of justice for sure also. But He leads with grace. He's quick to forgive. His heart is full of compassion for the lost cause.

[12 : 38] And ours is often angry first. He's throwing a party for little brother and we're pouting outside. I know you love grace on the books.

You're at a grace church, right? But do you really love it in real life? Do you celebrate it?

The religious leaders aren't being critiqued for their bad theology here, are they? What's being pushed on? It's that they're not in the party.

They're not willing to celebrate the same people. They're absent from God's party. Are you theologically close to the kingdom of God?

And in your heart, in your life, far away? Ask yourself, what makes you angry? Others getting more than they deserve?

[13 : 43] People who haven't worked as hard as you getting a break? What about on the other side of your heart? What makes you joyful? What do you really celebrate? Very little?

Having everything neat, tidy and under your control? Then it's okay. Making sure you can get what you deserve and work for each time in every situation?

Do you secretly feel sometimes, if you're honest, that a little bit more of God's blessings coming towards you would be honestly kind of fair? After all you've done, all you've sacrificed, all you've invested?

It's going to pay off, right? Does your life convict you of being a little bit like the older brother? Standing outside?

Research shows 93% of people in church on a rainy time change morning have this particular struggle. And 98% of pastors.

[14 : 50] Let me warn you of something. If that's you, if you see that in your heart, I'm very familiar with it. And I do this, and you're likely to try to fix the problem by performing differently, because that's your drug of choice.

Let me go do some more things for the Father. That's how I'm going to make this right. I see that. Oh, I've got a problem. Wait.

Slow down. He's inviting us to lay down, to repent of those good things we think put us in His good graces, to stop rushing to do for the Father, and first to be with the Father.

Slow down. Read His Word and learn His heart. Let's He love. Pray and ask Him to give you His heart.

Because, see, the Father's loving, gracious, generous, forgiving heart is for you, too, if you'll only receive it.

[16 : 03] He doesn't leave His house only for the younger son, does He? He comes out to plead with the older son, too. He leaves the party and steps out to invite you in.

His call, His invitation for all is to repent. That's what He celebrates. Is it your heart, too?

He's pleading for you to come in and celebrate and be with Him. Where? Where is He?

At the party. To celebrate the lost being found. The invitation is to lay down our sufficiency, our superiority, our self-righteousness, and to come in to God's party for the prodigal.

I recently heard this story that sociologist, author, pastor, Tony Campolo, wrote about his experience in Honolulu one night.

[17 : 09] Tony entered the only restaurant dive that he could find open late at night. And he went in and sat down at the counter. And he writes this. As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3.30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open, and to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway. When I overheard the woman beside me say, Tomorrow's my birthday.

I'm going to be 39. Her friend responded in a nasty tone, So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? You want me to get you a cake and sing happy birthday?

Come on, said the woman sitting next to me. Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday.

I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now? When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left.

[18 : 18] Then I called over Harry, the guy behind the counter, and I asked him, Do they come in here every night? Yeah, he answered. The one right next to me, does she come here every night?

Yeah, he said, that's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why do you want to know? Because I heard her say that tomorrow's her birthday, I told him. What do you say you and I do something about that?

What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her, right here, tomorrow night? Cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, That's great, I like it.

That's a great idea. So he tells his wife, the cook, who says, that's wonderful. You know, Agnes is one of those people who's really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her.

They offered to make her a cake. At 2.30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe paper decorations at the store, and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, Happy Birthday, Agnes!

[19 : 17] I decorated the diner from one end to the other. The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3.15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. At 3.30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend.

I had everybody ready, and when they came in, we all screamed, Happy Birthday! Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken.

Her mouth fell open, her legs seemed to buckle a bit, her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang, Happy Birthday to her.

As we came to the end of our singing with, Happy Birthday, dear Agnes, Happy Birthday to you, her eyes moistened. Then when the birthday cake, with all the candles on it, was carried out, she lost it, and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, Blow out the candles, Agnes, come on, blow out the candles. If you don't blow out the candles, I'm going to have to blow out the candles. And after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, Cut the cake, Agnes, show Agnes, we all want some cake.

[20 : 26] Agnes looked down at the cake, and without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, I mean, is it okay if I, I kind of, what I want to ask you is, is it okay if I keep the cake a little while?

I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away? Harry shrugged and answered, Sure, it's okay. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to. Can I? She asked.

Then looking at me, she said, I live just a couple doors down. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest. She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door.

As we all just stood there motionless, she left. When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, What do you say we pray?

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3.30 in the morning, but then it just felt like the right thing to do.

[21 : 34] I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, Hey, you never told me you were a preacher.

What kind of church do you belong to? In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3.30 in the morning.

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, No, you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it.

I think Jesus' desire here in this story is to tell us that there's a God like that who says we must celebrate for the dead is alive, the lost is found, we have to celebrate.

And so there ought to be churches like that. What could that look like here? Well, it might start with homes where sorrowful repentance is praised as much as dutiful obedience.

[22 : 56] Where parents repent to each other and kids see grace extended. Have you ever gone out for ice cream because someone said I'm sorry? And then what happens is people experiencing grace like that at home or in a small group gather together and throw a shower for the single teenage mom.

They gather together and throw a graduation party for the ex-con jobs for life graduate. They gather together and celebrate people no one else celebrates and love them towards repentance.

They gather together and throw a party for the kid at school who's never had one. They gather together and pray for their neighbors who don't know Jesus.

Jesus is doing some of that here. I hope Harry comes. He'd like it. I'd love him to join us. But would you join me in dreaming about what that could look like at Southwood and in Huntsville?

We're not like we ought to be in this. How could we seek the lost as our older brother has come to seek us? How could our lives together better reflect God's treasure hunting, sinner loving, repentance celebrating heart?

[24 : 28] Would you like to be on that party planning committee to figure out whom we're going to celebrate next? You never thought you'd be on a church committee, did you? You'll be on that one.

Ask things like, do we consistently seek out broken people to celebrate? Do we pray for and engage with our lost friends and neighbors as though we have a party we can't wait to invite them into?

What if we each just picked one person this year that we were going to make sure is celebrated and prayed for this year? Do we confess our sin to each other and celebrate God's grace together enough that there's a party that we'd actually be inviting them into?

Do we ever have people grumbling or wondering because of the kinds of people we celebrate and love? See, that's what Jesus produces when we really take his grace seriously, isn't it?

He produces tables in our kitchens and in this sanctuary with all sorts of people around them. All sorts of very different people who may not often be expected to be around the table and it can be a bit unnerving sometimes but because this is the Father's party because he's the one hosting it and sending the invitations if you come to this table this morning you should be warned.

[26 : 02] You will be coming and I can just look out here and tell you with liars with prostitutes with adulterers with gluttons with the proud with the short tempered with older brothers and God rejoices Jesus.

He celebrates that and the reason he celebrates is because those who come around this table he no longer identifies by any of those sins does he?

Because they all come repenting of their sin and clinging to their Savior Jesus Christ and so they come with a new identity that is the same all of them the same beloved children of God precious sons and daughters of the treasure hunting God who has found them and rejoices over them.

Listen I know enough of our stories in this room to tell you some of the types of sinners who come to that Savior and come to this table. I may not have named yours particularly but whatever your sin struggle is whatever it is that's keeping you from the Father Jesus delights in forgiving you and restoring you.

If you will turn from that sin and trust in Jesus alone please come share this celebration with us. If that's not where you are if you're not willing to trust him today to turn from the pigsty of the far country or to leave the fields where you're still working to earn enough to earn that young goat then don't come to this table.

[28 : 06] Don't take these elements rather consider Jesus consider his sacrifice for you as potentially being the only thing that could restore your relationship with the Father and you're still welcome to come forward to these tables this morning just ask us to pray with you instead of taking these elements we'd love to pray with you as you consider Jesus come let us pray with you about it.

Let's pray and then we'll come to the sacrament. Father we come dependent on you and we come to receive your gifts it's the body and blood of your son that's been given for us and so would you take this bread and this juice and set them apart they're common elements but we ask that your spirit would use them for a sacred purpose in our hearts to strengthen our faith that a God would even love someone like us as bad as we are as good as we've thought we were that you would still love us in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at [southwood.org](https://yetanother sermon.host)