

Easter Sunday

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[0 : 00] One of the biggest things in understanding a biblical story is understanding the context in which that story exists. Luke 15 actually appears in a story of three succinct parables.

And Jesus Christ is talking to a group of men called the Pharisees. Those were the religious rulers at the time. And the Pharisees were very frustrated.

They were very frustrated. If you know the history of how the Pharisees come about, if you read the Old Testament, you actually hear no word. You don't read any word. You hear no story of who these Pharisees were.

But we believe through history that they came about when Israel was in exile. And what they did is they decided to form this kind of a, they had no temple anymore, right?

Temple is in Jerusalem. So they're now in exile in these foreign lands. And they developed synagogues, places where Jews could come and worship.

[1 : 03] And this case grew out of that. They would have been Bible teachers and men who knew God's word. And they'd be known as holy men.

And one of the things that these men wanted to accomplish is that if God had punished Israel because of their lack of worship of him, that they did not know him, they wanted to make sure that God's people were well equipped with the word and looked like people who worshiped God so that exile would ever happen again.

You get me? So these guys, they're studying, they know God's word. In fact, they add so many rules and laws because that's what they believe they need. They need this type of structure around their life.

But something interesting happens. This guy named Jesus shows up on the scene who claims to be the son of God. In fact, it is known in John 3 that they all acknowledge that only Jesus could be of God because of the things that he did, the things that he preached, the people that he healed. But something was off. And what was off is that Jesus didn't eat with them. Jesus didn't hang out with them.

[2 : 29] Jesus, in fact, hung out with the quote-unquote riffraff of society. Those people who never darkened a synagogue had nothing to do with religion.

It would have been known as the tax collectors, the lepers, the unclean, the prostitutes even. These were people that Jesus actually enjoyed being with.

And this blew their mind. So Jesus wants to explain something to them. So Jesus Christ used this form of storytelling called parables.

So he kind of rips off these three parables. The first parable, simply asked him, If a man had a hundred sheep and one was missing, what would he do?

He would leave that 99 sheep behind and he would go out and find that lost sheep. And if you're with me in John 15, verse 7 says, Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repenting.

[3 : 47] He then tells the second story of a woman who has these hundred silver coins. And she loses the silver coin. And she searches everywhere until she can find that silver coin.

And she rejoices in this silver coin. And we read in verse 10, it says, Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Because in the Pharisees' mind, they were righteous. And those people that Jesus Christ was with were sinners. Now if you notice, both the ending of these parables in verse 7 and 10, begin with just so.

That's how he finalizes these parables. But then he goes into this other parable.

This parable is going to blow their minds away. The key to understanding this parable is the actual cultural context in which it is placed.

[5 : 05] And you're going to notice certain things. And this is why I want to take some time to teach this parable. I'm actually just going to run through this very simple parable and tell you exactly what is going on here.

So if you take a look at verse 11, and you know, I'll be honest with you, Dave brought out the ladder a couple weeks ago. You know, that was like a shot across my bow, right? I needed more stuff on the stage.

So I'm not going to go that far, but I'm going to use PowerPoint. All right. People said, oh, dogs can't learn new tricks.

I call them wrong. All right. So read along with me what Jesus Christ is telling to these men.

And he said, there was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.

[6 : 04] Now, the key to understanding this parable is understanding it is called an inward focused culture, as opposed to an outward focused culture.

Some of you might not know what that means. But as I explain a little bit, it's going to come into play. This is very important. One of the things that some of you guys know about me is that I spent time in the government.

I used to do interrogations and interviews with people from all over the world. And this would be one of the first things that I would look for is in what kind of culture does this person come from?

In the Middle East, it is a inward culture. And what that means is people behave in such a way as to protect the group. Your whole role in that culture as an individual is to protect the group.

All right? To behave in a way that brings dishonor to the group is called shame. Right? This is a very strong motivator.

[7 : 08] I remember one time I'm on a case and I know this guy is lying to me. And I simply point out, if I go back to my superiors and tell them this story that you've told me, it will bring me great shame.

He knew that immediately and told me the truth. Because in his mind, he wants to please me and he knows that he wants to bring honor to me as opposed to bringing shame.

So that's what happens in an inward focus group. Now, what's important to note is lying is not necessarily bad. Lying can be a good thing if it brings honor to your culture.

Lying would be bad if it brought dishonor. Sadly, there's that news very recently. I'm sure it was just in the news about the woman who returned back to India.

And she ended up being killed by her mother and her uncle because she was marrying a rickshaw driver. Okay? That is based on this cultural context.

[8 : 14] By this woman marrying someone below her, she was bringing shame on the family name. So you guys with me on this? Everything that we're going to be understanding in this sermon is driven by this view of an inward focus culture.

The most inward focus culture, if you're wondering, in the world is probably Japan. Everything is done to protect the group. The most extreme, extreme outward country is here.

And in the United States, the individual is number one. Right? So you get those two points. We have rights. In those countries, you as an individual do not have rights.

So keeping this in mind, this younger son's request to the father to say, Hey, I want my inheritance is completely unheard of.

It's not like he heard his buddy Ricky down the road doing this to his dad and he's now driving the Ferrari. Doesn't work like that. They probably knew no one.

[9 : 25] If they did, they wouldn't have heard about it. They would have just heard the story, Ricky's dead. If someone had made that request to a father, generally would have led to their death.

And we're going to see that a little bit more. So if you put yourself into the Pharisees' shoes, the way Jesus begins this story is that they would be saying, there is no way any son would make this request.

This request would bring tremendous shame on the family. What the son is asking for, his share, which be a third of the inheritance as we understand, because there's another son involved, he'd be communicating to his dad, Dad, I wish you were dead.

Dad, I wish you were dead. You are in the way of what is mine and I want it now.

It's not like he has any right to this. As the older one will come before him and only after the father passes on the inheritance, would he even get an inheritance.

[10:43] So the Pharisees are expecting to hear a response. They'd be expecting to hear that the older brother would rise up and beat the younger brother.

That's generally what would happen. Because it would be interfering with his inheritance. And it would be knocking his father's shame. So the Pharisees are expecting to hear the older brother got in, beat his brother to the point that he got in line, or his father had other people do that in order to protect the family name.

Now what comes next in verse 12 is even more outlandish. Verse 12, And he divided his property between them.

So despite public humiliation being put on the father because of this openly rebellious son, the father does what would be considered shameful, disrespectful, and utterly unheard of in that community context.

Verse 13, Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and he squandered his property in reckless living.

[12:04] So here the father gave his son what he wanted. Two things would have generally happened. He would have either been able to sold off a third, but what he most likely did is he most likely took out a loan against the value of that property in order to hand over his son's inheritance.

This all comes back on the father, doesn't it? The Pharisees, listen to this. What a shameful, stupid father you are, that you would do such a thing.

Shameful for listening to your son and not beating him into line. Shame for doing what he asked and not protecting your family fortune and honor.

Shame for having a son who would do such horrible things. This story, as the Pharisees are listening to it, is completely crazy.

It's crazy in their minds. Now we all know what happens. Verse 14, we read, When he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country and began, he began to be in need.

[13:18] So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country. Now in verse 15, that word hired actually means he attached himself.

He glued himself to someone in almost a beggar-like fashion. So the job that he got was not even a legitimate job. It was just a job that they gave him to get rid of him because he was such an annoyance.

So here we have this Jewish boy in a Gentile land feeding pigs. What's interesting is there is enough money to feed the pigs, but not enough food to really take care of himself.

I think we see the reality as desperate times calls for desperate measures. We already know that this man has no honor, so to work with pigs is no issue for this Gentile boy.

Again, this comes back to the Pharisees. What are they thinking? Shame on this man for having such a son that he would have to eat with pigs.

[14:36] Verse 16, And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. Truly, can it get any lower?

Could it be any more dishonoring? What's interesting here is there's a deep theological lesson involved here. When it comes to sin, which is rebelling against God, let me tell you something. If you want your sin, God will give it to you. If you chase after your sin, God will let you go. A lot of people blame God, right?

Who get into sin sometimes. Why didn't God stop me? Why didn't God prevent me from doing it? But scripture actually teaches, go. Have it.

God will give you the freedom to pursue your sin. And you can choose to pursue it as far as you want.

[15:46] God. This boy is proof of this. This is a boy who had everything. However, he did not care for what his father gave him, the riches and the life that he had for him.

He wanted his own way, and God gave it to him. That's exactly sin, isn't it? When you truly want to go your own way.

It's disdain for God. It's disdain for God's person. It is disdain for God's rule. It is disdain for God's authority.

It's disdain for God's will. It's disdain for God's goodness. And it's disdain for the resources he has loving you, provided with you. One author on this subject writes, sin is a desire to run from God, to

avoid all responsibility, all accountability to God.

It is to deny God in any place of your life. It is to dishonor God, to take the living gifts that are available to you, and squander them as far away from God as you can get.

[17:01] Reality is, sin looks for fulfillment outside and away from God. And yet, we know these stories, friends. Who do you know has taken off after their sin, come back and said, that was really great and fulfilling?

Sin leaves the sinner exhausted, empty, hungry, and hopeless. There is never a happy ending with sin.

See, what Jesus has done in creating this person, this son, is incredibly bad. Jesus is actually creating the worst possible sinner sinner that you can imagine.

This guy disrespected his parents, disrespected his family, his community, disrespected his own body. He's horribly immoral. He violated every cultural law and conformity.

But the question is, is not how bad a person can be, but how in the world is the father going to deal with someone that could be so bad? Something happens here in verse 17.

[18:19] But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have more than enough food? But I punish here, I perish here with hunger.

So now, he's coming to his senses. What he is doing, is he's understanding his plight without his father.

He sees his true condition, and he recognizes, I am in a bad mess. But he says something here that's very, very interesting.

How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread? This tells us something about the father.

He was wealthy. Most likely, he was a landowner, perhaps a tenant farmer. He would have had craftsmen working for him, other farmers working for him.

[19:18] He would have had servants. Some served as part of the family. Some were hired. Most likely, housed them, fed them. And then the lowest order in the Jewish first century class is the hired servant or the hired hand.

And what this means is it's basically a day worker. We don't see this very often in our context, but if you're from the southern U.S., you guys know very well, if you need someone to work for you, where do you go find someone?

Home Depot. Home Depot. There's going to be a group of guys hanging out at Home Depot willing to work for you for the day. Usually, they probably will be illegal immigrants, but that's where people who want work are going to hang out.

You just pull up. You need six guys. They're with you for the day. Not exaggerating. That's what goes on there. Okay? That's who this guy is. He's saying, I could even go to my dad as the lowest form of servant and I will be okay.

Now, what's interesting is that hired hand would usually make enough money to get through the day. Get that?

[20:31] You don't get rich by being a day laborer, but you have enough to put a roof over your head to feed you, to get you to tomorrow, and you start the whole process over again.

So, but his father, we read here, gives these people the hired hands more than enough. So, this son is recognizing his father actually is a generous man.

A merciful man, in fact. So, look in verse 18. He says, I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. Now, he recognizes when he goes back into his hometown, he just doesn't have to deal with his dad.

He's got to deal with his brother and he's got to deal with the rest of the community. He knows this is going to be about major shame and he's okay with that.

[21:38] He also knows that his sin is unto heaven himself. This man actually has absolute clarity on what he has done and who he is.

And in his mind, he believes he does not deserve any special treatment, he deserves no special privilege, and he doesn't have any excuse.

He is shooting for the bottom, not even expecting to be a part of the father's home. As one author states, this man is willing to take the punishment, the humiliation, and the hard labor.

This, my friends, is what we as pastors call true repentance. He gets it. I'm a sinner and I am worthy of nothing of God's greatest mercy.

He's come to the end of his rope. He's not offering any excuses. He realizes he deserves nothing, but it is going to rely on the compassion and mercy he knows that his father has.

[22 : 51] And he's simply going to say, Dad, can I have the lowest rung on the ladder? Now, the Pharisees listen to this story and they're like, all right, this guy's getting it, right?

He's probably not going to get it, but he's going to come home, probably get a beating and maybe he'll get that hired labor role. You know, this is a chance for the father and the brother to recapture their honor, to do the right and just thing.

In fact, the father would have any right if someone told him, hey, your son's here, the father would have every right to let his son wait at the door for days.

You know what? I'll see him when I'm ready to see him. I'm not coming on his agenda. I see him on my agenda. Have him wait out there and then I will see if I have time.

So here is the son ready to set out and trust his father's goodness. Verse 20, And he arose and came to his father.

[24 : 03] But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Okay. I don't know, what was that cartoon where smoke would come out of the guy's ears? That's what's going on with the Pharisees right now. They're hearing this story and the cart, the wheels are coming off the cart.

This is nonsensical. This is crazy. A few things we see here. First, the father is seeking. If he saw his son afar off, guess what that father was doing every day?

Looking for his son. Looking for his son. The father felt compassion in the Pharisees' mind.

Could this man be any weaker? The fact that he's rich and wealthy? The reality is Middle Eastern men of this type of stature do not run unless there's a line after them.

[25 : 15] But they don't. It's undignified to run. It wasn't stately. Yet this man that Jesus talks about races to his son, his rebellious son.

And in fact, in the Pharisees' mind, this man is even more shameful than he first appeared. Why does the father race to his son?

Because he wants to see him. He wants him to not experience the shame and indignation that he'd have to suffer by the village and other workers there.

If he were to walk up to the house, people would be throwing rocks at him, food, crying out to him. Instead, the father runs to him.

Yes, this is this pig smelling son who this man kisses. Not once, not twice, but this is a storm of kisses that he gives to his son.

[26 : 25] His forgiven son. So as we see the son gets ready for this speech in verse 21, he says, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. He's ready to say, I deserve nothing, but the lowest hired hand, could you please give me that position?

But notice 22 says, but there's an interruption. But the father said to his servants, bring quickly the best robe, put it on him, put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate for this my son was dead and he is alive again.

He was lost and is found and they began to celebrate. What is this called? Well, to the Pharisees on that day who sat there before Jesus, this was called crazy.

Crazy. But to a sinner who recognizes this story, this is called grace. Grace. Notice he doesn't have to learn, earn the love of the father back.

[27 : 45] You guys ever feel like that? You have to earn God's love. Hey man, God forgives me. I got to put in a few years of good actions here.

We get like that in our prayers sometimes, right? God, if you give us what I want, if you're really good to me here, I'll devote myself. You guys probably don't know I'm on a 15 year pilgrimage of being a pastor because I asked for a prayer.

No. Of course not, right? But sometimes we get into that thinking. You see, to do so, to try to quote unquote make that deal with God, is actually to insult the love of God.

Do you know that? There is no condition upon God when you repent. It's there. You don't have to earn it. It's given graciously and unjudiciously.

It's there. Take it. He is willing to lavish you with his love. Yes, even us, the worst of sinners.
[28 : 56] And like spiritual salvation, it's instantaneous. There was no ceremony. There is no special prayers.

There are no works the son needs to do. You want to be a laborer in my house? Run around my farm ten times. Nothing like that. He just hugs him and braces him and kisses him. And he doesn't even ask him to clean himself up. He's willing to put on this robe. The way these robes were in the Middle Ages, if you didn't know this, they were actually hand-me-downs. And they weren't something that you'd wear every day, but they'd be a special family robe and you'd pass it on through the generations. And it meant your wealth and your riches. This ring that you'd be given, it's unable to sign and seal documents so that you had authority, which meant you could act on behalf of his father.

[29 : 58] And he mentions this whole thing called shoes. The reality is slaves and higher men did not wear shoes in those days, but those who had responsibility did.

So what the father does on that morning when his son shows up, he returns them to the place of full sonship. He gives him back the dignity, authority, and responsibility and gets to seat at the banquet table with his father.

This is how grace triumphs over sin. What do they do? They party. Amen? It reminds us of verse 7. Joy. Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repenting.

Joyful ending, isn't it? The Pharisees are beside themselves. They do not like this story. But Jesus continues.

[31 : 08] verse 25. Now his older son was in the field and he came and drew near to the house. He heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants and asked what these meant. And the servant told him, your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has received him back safe and sound.

It's interesting that there's a party going on but the older son does not know about this. Why do you think this is?

Jesus is communicating here that this older son had no more of a relationship to the father than the younger son. He doesn't even know what his father's business is about.

Even though he stays in the land, works in the land, the older son had no more respect for his father. And the father knew this. This son plays absolutely no part in the redemption that we see.

[32 : 23] The words at the end of verse 27, it says safe and sound because he has received him back safe and sound. The Hebrew would have said, shalom. There is peace.

There is peace in the house once more. The prodigal son has returned. Is this man happy to have his brother back?

Verse 28, but he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out again and entreated him. Now the Pharisees, they like this guy.

Right? This is the way it should be. This is how we would act. Here are the Pharisees being represented by the older brother.

And here the father's engaged in another shameful act. He goes out to his other son begging him. He leaves the party which was for him and goes to the son who hates him.

[33 : 32] Here you have the Pharisees looking down at the tax collectors and the sinners failing to recognize that they are just as lost as the people they aspire so much not to be like.

Verse 29, and he answered his father, look, these many years I have served you. I have never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

And when this son of yours, notice he says this son of yours, not my brother, right? You know that's a little disdain going on, right? This son of yours who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.

that word look, it's about pay attention. This man is showing no honor for his father.

He's saying, hey, I kept all the laws, I kept all the commandments, I did all that was right. Sadly, we learn here that there's pride in duty, isn't there?

[34 : 53] The things that we feel that we're supposed to do. It's a grind, it's bitter, and it develops pride. It's the expectation that we deserve something.

We see this in many Christians who get mad at God. I did this, this, and this, and I didn't get what I wanted. This is exactly the mindset that's being represented by the older brother here.

And he, the father, said to him, son, which means tender boy, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive, he was lost, and is found.

The fact is you never had to do all the work, keep up the schedules. All you had to do was have a relationship with me.

This is a tragedy. Here's this son lived with the father, could have had everything for free, but yet he's trying to work for it.

[36 : 15] Now, if you remember, in the first two stories, they ended with this story that says just, they ended with just so, ending the story.

If you notice in this parable, there is no ending. The reality is it's written in such a way that you are to input your own ending.

Choose your own adventure. How do you want it to end? The older brother confesses, hugs his dad, and they go into the party together celebrating not the return of the prodigal son, but they are celebrating the father and his tender mercies.

Why does this story have anything to do with Easter? Well, we learned that the older brother who acted his whole life in control of doing the right thing reaches out for a piece of wood and literally beats his father to death.

death. That is the true ending to the prodigal son. What happened on Good Friday?

[37 : 48] It's all about the older brother taking a piece of wood and nailing his father on the cross.

This is what these Pharisees would do in a few months time. My old pastor comments on this.

The final irony is that the father who should have beaten the son is beaten to death by the wicked son in the greatest act of evil ever.

My friends, this is what happened on Good Friday. But why here on Easter Sunday we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The good father lives and the good father loves and receives us. Amen. Let's pray. Okay.