

The Joy of Heaven

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. Our sermon text this morning is Luke chapter 15. That's page 821 in the Pew Bible.

Let me invite you to turn there with me. Our passage today is often and perhaps rightly regarded as the greatest of all Jesus' parables.

It has been the subject of not just endless biblical commentary and preaching since the days of the early church, but it's also been an enduring subject for great painters, dramatists, choreographers, musicians, writers, even philosophers.

Nietzsche wrote about the parable of the prodigal son. And yet, as one commentator put it, none of the parallels or the retellings can measure up to or compare with the moving force of this story as told by Jesus himself.

So friends, let's do just that. Let's encounter this parable together in its most powerful form in the words of Jesus himself. Luke chapter 15. Let me read this for us.

[1 : 1 1] Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him, that is Jesus, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

So he told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if the father has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.

Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?

And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I have lost. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

[2 : 2 7] And he said, there was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me this share of property that is coming to me.

And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property and reckless living.

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. And no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread?

But I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father. And I will say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

[3 : 33] Treat me as one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate.

For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near 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's received him back, safe and sound. But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.

[4 : 54] 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 the 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 are 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. He was lost and is found.

Let's pray together. Our father, we are so grateful for the word that you've given us in the scriptures that we can encounter again and afresh the very words of Christ spoken again by your spirit to our hearts.

O father, we pray that you would open us to really hear and receive what it is you're saying today to us, your church. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[6 : 14] Amen. Well, friends, I wonder if you've ever been upset when someone was having fun without you.

H.L. Mencken once said that Puritanism was the haunting fear that someone somewhere may be happy. Now, that was completely untrue about the Puritans.

John Owen, the great Puritan theologian, was often criticized in his day for being too fashionable. Imagine that. He wore knee-high leather boots. And his critics would say he had as much powder powder in his hair that would discharge eight cannons.

They seem to be okay with having a little fun. Our passage begins with Jesus receiving criticism. And criticism for dining with the wrong sort of people.

This man, do you hear the contempt in their voices? This man receives sinners and eats with them. According to the religious establishment of the day, Jesus spent far too much time with the outcasts, the irreligious, and the immoral.

[7 : 37] Even sharing table fellowship and hospitality with them, which was a big deal in the first century. And how would Jesus respond to such criticism?

How would you? How would you? And here's how Jesus' parable is so surprising. Rather than respond with sort of shrill self-justification that we've become so used to today, rather than simply attack his critics as close-minded bigots, instead he launches out in this three-fold parable, this tour de force to actually try to win them over, to change their hearts and to bring them to the table too.

In the English-speaking world, we know this story as the parable of the prodigal son. But the lead-in in verses three through ten is all about lost things being found.

A lost sheep, a lost coin. So in German, it's known as the parable of the lost son. But the heartbeat of this story, the main character, is God.

Behind the shepherd, behind the woman, behind the father is the heart of God seeking out the lost and heaven erupting in joy when the lost are found.

[9 : 13] And that erupting joy of the father reaches right out of the parable to the critics themselves and says, you too, come in, come home.

So let's consider first Jesus' point in verses three through ten. All of heaven rejoices when the lost are found.

A shepherd loses a sheep. A woman loses a silver coin. One-tenth of her life savings. And of course, they search diligently going after what's been lost and when they find it, they have a party.

Friends and neighbors are invited to come and rejoice. Apparently, Albert Schweitzer was teaching this story in a confirmation class and one boy blurted out, what a silly woman.

She spent more on the party than the coin was worth in the first place. I don't know if that's a true story about Albert Schweitzer. That might be totally apocryphal, but maybe, you know, just maybe.

[10 : 27] That's part of Jesus' point. The joy of heaven over sinners who repent is exuberant. It's extravagant.

Even for one, Jesus says, God fills heaven with joy. You see, what Jesus' critics were missing and what we too often fail to see is the missionary heart of God.

God's initiative throughout Scripture to bring his people back home. Ezekiel 34 is one of these places where we see that. It speaks of God's search and rescue mission.

God's sheep, Ezekiel says, were scattered over the earth and no one searched and no one looked for them. Israel's leaders had abandoned the search, but God declares in Ezekiel 34 11 and 16, I myself will search for my sheep and look for them.

I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. The missionary heart of God. But this missionary heart of God in the Old Testament extends not just to the lost house of Israel, but to the nations as well.

[11 : 44] The book of Jonah that we read from earlier is about God extending his mercy to the pagan city of Nineveh. And then, much like Luke 15, it's about teaching the resentful Jonah about how much he really does love the lost.

And how far God's willing to go to bring them home. Even if it means swallowing a prophet with a giant fish and spitting him out three days later.

God will gather his people. And so, Jesus, in fulfillment of God's mission here in Luke, pursues the lost.

When this whole section of the Gospel of Luke comes to an end in chapter 19, these words of Jesus will be how it closes. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Why does Jesus spend so much time with tax collectors and sinners? Why does he eat with them? Why does he receive them as friends? Why does he do it so much so that it's making people a little uncomfortable? Why?

[12 : 54] Why? Because he's the shepherd not giving up his search and he's the woman not putting out the lamp until all his lost are found and the heavens erupt with joy.

Now, I don't think many of us would consider ourselves Pharisees this morning and not many of us would perhaps criticize Jesus for eating with so-called sinners and tax collectors.

On the contrary, I think most of us here would commend it, I'm sure. And yet, can we say that this joy of heaven is our joy too?

Do we share the pursuing, befriending, searching, boundary-crossing love for the lost that God has revealed in Jesus?

Does it excite us? Does it fire our imaginations? J.C. Ryle puts it to us in these, I think, quite challenging words.

[14 : 07] He says, the person who can take a deep interest in politics or field sports or money-making or gaining popularity but take none in the conversion of souls is no true Christian.

What about us as a church? We can get excited about a lot of things, can't we? Projects, programs, buildings.

things. But friends, it is all useless if we don't share the joy of heaven over the lost being found.

As many of you know, we're embarking on a building project. Why are we doing it? Above all, it's so that we can go on spreading the table of God's grace and inviting more and more and more people to join.

We want the joy of heaven to be increasingly our joy. We want to rejoice more and more over the lost being found. But the question is, how do we rekindle that joy?

[15 : 27] When we get discouraged because our friends and our neighbors don't seem to be showing any real spiritual interest. When we get distracted by the very real responsibilities of work and family and even church.

When we know in our minds that our joy should be for the lost being found, but in our hearts we just don't feel it. What do we do?

Did you notice how verse 1 begins? The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

They were attracted to Jesus. There was something about him that they hadn't experienced before in other religious leaders. He sought them, yes, but they were also drawn to him.

Why are the immoral and the irreligious drawing near to hear Jesus? I think if we can see the reason why, then we'll see how to rekindle and realign our joy with the joy of heaven.

[16 : 45] and this brings us to the center of our passage, the first half of the parable of the lost son, where Jesus shows us the extravagant grace of the father.

He tells us about the exceeding joy of heaven in verses 1 through 10 and now the extravagant grace of the father. Verses 11 through 24 are the part of Luke 15 that have rightfully been retold and recast time and time again in literature and art and dance and music.

But you know, let's take a step back for a second and ask what about this message of Jesus would be so attractive to tax collectors and sinners, to the immoral and the irreligious?

At first, it doesn't seem like good news at all. In verses 12 through 13, Jesus exposes the natural bent of our fallen hearts. The younger brother requests his share of the father's inheritance while his father is still living, then he sells his shares of the property, turns it into cash, deserts his family, goes to a far country and squanders his money in the pursuit of pleasure.

Not a very flattering picture of our humanity, is it? But this is how all of us naturally treat God. We want his stuff more than we want a relationship with him.

[18 : 14] And whatever good he gives us, we seem to be uncontrollably bent to use it for our own ends rather than for his. But Jesus doesn't just expose the natural bent of our fallen hearts, he also shows us the bitter outcome of pursuing life apart from God.

In verses 13 through 16, the younger son goes on this downward spiral. He squanders the family money, a famine hits, his so-called friends desert him, notice how it ends, and no one was there to help him.

And he finds himself feeding pigs. Imagine that. A Jewish boy working on an unclean Gentile pig farm.

So hungry, he's willing to eat the same food he's feeding the pigs. Talk about hitting utter bottom. And again, Jesus is showing us here that this is the eventual outcome of pursuing life apart from God.

We will, Jesus says, hit bottom. Maybe not financially, maybe not physically, but certainly spiritually. After showing us the downward spiral, Jesus also shows us here the working of repentance in the heart.

[19 : 35] The younger brother comes to himself in verse 17. Realizing that his father's hired hands have it better, he decides to go home and confess his wrong.

But he has no expectations that his father will continue to treat him as a son. No, he thinks the best he can hope for is to be treated as one of his father's hired servants.

And then he gets up and he heads for home in humility and in shame. he gets up and he heads home.

You see throughout this chapter Jesus is not saying that sinners and tax collectors were simply to be accepted as they stand. Jesus is clear. Sinners must repent. The lost sheep and lost coin must be found.

The prodigal son comes to his senses and returns home. But again, why was all of this such good news? Why the crowds?

[20 : 32] Why were the outsiders and the irreligious gathering near to Jesus? Up to this point, Jesus just sounds like any other religious or moral teacher, right? After all, the Pharisees would have stressed the need for repentance too.

What made Jesus any different? Well, the difference is what Jesus said you would find when you actually return home.

What would you find? verse 20. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him. The father, it seems, had never forgotten his son, never disowned him.

He had been scanning the horizon, eagerly waiting and hoping for his return. His father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

You see, the father doesn't wait for the son to come crawling back and beg and plead for forgiveness and then prove himself. No, while the son is still a long way off, and even before the son gets out a word, the father runs to him.

[21 : 41] I was thinking about this yesterday. Have you ever run to meet someone? How thrilled must you be to run and meet someone?

Let alone embrace and kiss them. And the son said to him, father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet.

Robe and ring and shoes, all of these are emblems that this wayward son is being received back, not as a servant, but as a son.

servants didn't wear shoes, but sons wore shoes. You get the sandals, you get the robe, you get the ring, you're my son.

He's restored and he's reinstated and he's clothed with honor and dignity. But there's even more. The father says, bring the fattened calf and kill it.

[22 : 52] let us eat and celebrate for this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. The father initiates a community-wide party, a feast, because his son has returned.

You know, in the first century, meat was only eaten on very special occasions and this fattened calf would have been something that they were saving. You know, it was sort of this special animal that they were feeding and keeping around for only the most important and special and utterly groundbreaking celebrations.

And here, this prized gift is lavished on the son who returns home. I wonder, if you come home to God, what sort of reception do you think you would find?

What would be the look on the father's face when he saw you coming from afar? Do you think he would take you back only as a servant with certain conditions and certain terms that you would have to keep just in case things didn't work out?

Or would he actually take you back as a son, as a daughter, as a beloved child? friends, the glory of the gospel, the wonder of Jesus' message is that the heavenly father takes us back in lavish, unmitigated, unrestrained grace.

[24 : 32] no matter how far we've fallen, no matter how lost we think we are, there's a robe and a ring and a feast waiting for you in the house of your heavenly father.

You see, the promise of the gospel isn't just that God's going to forgive you, but that he's going to honor you and that he's going to rejoice over you. And he's not going to do it because you deserve it or because you've earned it.

You could never do that. He's going to do it because he loves you. Because he loves you. Do you see now why the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear this Jesus?

Here was a teacher saying that God accepted us by sheer undeserved grace apart from our works that no matter how far we had fallen, no matter how reckless and sinful we become, no matter how much of a mess we've made of our life, there's a place of honor ready to be lavished upon us.

Not for the deserving, but for the undeserving. Not for the worthy, but for the unworthy. The father's eyes are scanning the horizon. His feet are ready to run, his arms are ready to embrace.

[26 : 02] And for sinners, that is such good, good news. But not everyone sees it that way.

There's another son in this story, you remember. And here's the real point Jesus has been driving toward the whole time. there are some who think they are righteous, as verse seven puts it, and who think they need no repentance.

It's obvious that Jesus has characterized his critics as the older brother in this story, isn't it? The Pharisees grumble that he eats with tax collectors and sinners, years. And this older brother is angry, grumbling, that the father would celebrate at the return of the younger brother.

But Jesus says, don't you see, this is the very mission and joy of heaven. The father is full of extravagant grace, rejoicing because the lost are found.

And you, Pharisees, you're like this older brother, angry and resentful because the father is celebrating his lost son's return. And in this paragraph, Jesus suddenly turns the story upside down.

[27 : 23] One writer drew out the contrast this way. He said, you know, you see the younger son who's reckless in disobedience and confesses his sin. And then you have the elder son, ungrateful in his obedience, insisting on his rights.

The younger son renounces all his claims to sonship and invites servitude. servitude. The elder son complains of disappointed sonship and despises the servitude to which he thinks himself unfairly reduced.

Notice in verse 29 how the older brother says, look, these many years I've served you. Literally, he says, I've slaved away for you. The younger brother receives mercy from his father.

father, the elder accuses the father in resentful self-righteousness. The younger son confessed, I've sinned without excuse. The older son complains, I have served without recompense.

The great irony here is that at the story's end, it's the older brother who's outside the feast and estranged from his father. father, the very ones who thought they were in, are actually out.

[28 : 46] And that makes us wonder who really is the lost son of Luke 15. The reality is they're both lost.

The younger brother broke all the rules, the older brother kept all the rules, and in the end, they both need to be rescued. And here's where Jesus' story surprises us the most.

He's not done yet. The father goes out to the elder brother too. And while the older brother never calls him father, did you notice that?

The father still calls him son. And he doesn't use the ordinary word for son, the father uses the word *technon*, which here is a term of endearment, full of affection and warmth and compassion.

You see, this older son is bitter and resentful. He's self-righteous and proud. He is lost. He's lost in the most pernicious and dangerous way because on the outside he looks so good. He is lost.

[29 : 58] But to him too, the father comes in love as well and says, son, you're always with me. And all that is mine is yours. You know, this is the really, really scandalous thing about God's grace.

Not just that we all need it, but that we all can have it. If you and I were telling this story, we'd let the Pharisees have it, wouldn't we?

The younger son would be celebrated and the older son would be thrown out. He would get what's coming to him. Outer darkness, exclusion, you're done.

We'd let the older brother get what's coming to him. But don't you realize, friends, literally, by definition, that's not how God's grace works. It's undeserved favor for the undeserving.

If there's hope for the unrighteous, then there's hope for the self-righteous too. And that hope is the undeserved love of the Father.

[31 : 15] I sometimes wonder how the older brother felt as he heard those words coming out of his own mouth in verses 29 and 30. Have you ever been there when you start speaking and you surprise yourself at what starts coming out?

Do you think he surprised himself? I've slaved away for you and you've given me nothing. And the son of yours comes home having ripped apart your property and spent it on prostitutes and you give him the biggest party.

In that moment, I wonder if he saw his self-righteousness for what it truly was for the first time. And I wonder if he was uncertain in that moment how his father would respond to his ungratefulness and his resentment and his bitterness.

If he was uncertain at that moment how the father would respond to his own sort of rejection of the father. And the greatest surprise of all is that the father responds here too in grace.

But just as the younger son needed to repent and come home, so the older son needs to repent and come home too. And practically, what that meant for him was this.

[32 : 30] Coming back into fellowship with his father has to mean coming back into fellowship with his younger brother too. Notice the father says in verse 32, this, your brother.

He's reversing the older son's word in verse 30 where he said, this son of yours, he says, disowning his brother on the spot. No, the father pushes back. This, your brother.

And the solidarity that the older brother has to acknowledge with the younger brother is more than just biological. They are from the same family, yes, but more than that, they're from the same spiritual family.

In other words, the older son is just as unworthy to join the father's feast as the younger son. And he needs to get that. they are truly brothers, they are truly equals, that is, they are both sinners in need of radical grace.

And that is where the parable ends, with an invitation. Will we recognize our need for grace and having done so, join repentant sinners at the table of the father?

[33 : 47] and seeing ourselves in need of grace just as much as everyone else, will we celebrate with the joy of heaven at the lost being found?

And yet the parable still isn't complete until we see one last piece, until we see that the true and better elder brother isn't the one in the story, but the one telling the story.

After all, on what grounds does the father reinstate the younger brother? Have you thought about that? If the inheritance has already been divided, then the younger brother had already received his customary one-third of the estate, and, as we know, it's been sold and spent.

It is gone. The remaining two-thirds of the father's property now belong entirely to him. The elder brother. When the father says in verse 31, all that is mine is yours, that is literally true.

All that is left belongs by right to the older brother. So, who then pays the price for reinstating the younger brother? And who bears the cost of receiving this sinner home again?

[35 : 15] it's supposed to be the older brother. But the brother in this story seems so unwilling to pay. And yet, we have a better older brother.

Do you want to realign your joy with the joy of heaven? Do you want to rekindle your love over the loss being found? Do you want your heart to be thrilled by the mission of God?

Do you want your heart to come aflame with a divine love for the lost? Then you need to fix your gaze on your true elder brother Jesus, who was willing to leave heaven and go into the far country after us.

And he was willing and glad to pay the cost with his own life so that we could become the sons and daughters of God again and come home. This is the mission of God and the joy of heaven.

And Jesus has done it. Are you ready to join him friends? Are you ready to let his joy invade your life and invade our church and send us on this glad mission of redemption?

[36 : 27] Then fix your eyes on Christ. Let's pray. Amen. Father, we ask that as we prepare to come to this table where we remember the shedding of the blood of your son and the breaking of his body.

Oh Lord, we pray that you would rekindle in our hearts a deep abiding gratitude for your grace for us. Lord, it's so hard for us at times to acknowledge that we aren't worthy of your love and your grace.

Lord, fill us with a vision of the love of Christ, taking off his robe and his ring and coming down to be spent for us, to make room for us and to make time for us and paying the price of our reinstatement as your children.

Oh, fill our hearts with that vision and rekindle our love for you and our love for those who don't yet know you. We pray this in Christ's name.

Amen.