

Jesus has just told two parables about the nature of Heaven's joy when sinners come to repentance. To do so, he used a lost sheep and a lost coin to indicate the joy upon the "foundness" of each. In this third parable, He intensifies this truth to fantastic depths. Not only did we, like sheep, go astray, but rather we were unruly, ungrateful, hateful sons who wished our Father dead so that we could have these things. We robbed God, despised Him, ran from Him so that we could do the things that we wanted to do outside the supposed authority of His kingdom. By rejecting Him so, we suffered. We suffered loss, we squandered blessings, we ruined ourselves and were left with nothing but slavery to show for it.

At the end of this parable, only one son has the father, and only one son is in the house, and only one son is experiencing the fullness of the father joy: the humble repentant son who knows he is unworthy of it, yet rejoices in God's grace. The other son refuses to enter because he sees the Father's grace as unfair to those, like him, who have earned it and to whom the goods are owed. You see, both sons are lost in this story, wanting the things of the father more than the father himself. And only one enters in, because he knows his sin, his inability, his depravity, and comes to the father for the sake of the father's mercy rather than what he can gain.

Jesus wants the Pharisees to know, however, just how greatly God Himself responds with shameless extravagance, rejoicing over lost sinners who repent. You see, it is not merely heaven that rejoices, or angels that rejoice, but God Himself shamelessly rejoices when sinners fly back to Him in humble unentitled dependence. Let's look at this first lost son today, and we will look deeper at the older lost son in two weeks. In the midst of looking at these sons, however, let us not miss the real protagonist of this story: the Father.

1. We Hated God

a. Younger Son

- i. less honored position in ANE
- ii. Jesus is being very gracious to the Pharisees

b. Asked for his inheritance

- i. What the younger son is saying here, then, is that he wishes the father were dead
 1. He loves the inheritance more than he loves the father
 2. The inheritance was only given once the father was either dead, or about to die
- ii. This was a very shameful thing to do in an honor/shame society
 1. He was shaming his father before all the other people, and before the rest of the family
 2. In fact, in the ANE the father would be expected to drive his son out of the household by verbal and physical blows at such a request
- iii. It also was an incredible economic hardship on the entire family
 1. The Father would have to liquidate family assets in order to give them to the son
 2. This means selling productive land, firing workers, downsizing the entire working business
 3. Consider if you had to liquidate 1/3 of your assets and give them to one of your children
- iv. What we have here is a very selfish young man, heartless, self-seeking, wanting to be out of the house and seeking his own happiness more than being near the father and the family

c. FATHER GIVES IT TO HIM - How merciful!

- i. The Father bears up his son's shame and hatred and desire for him to be dead with incredible graciousness
 - ii. The Elder son also suffered because of his younger brother's idolatry and this, as we will see later, clashed with his own idolatry and leads to a deepening break within the family
- 2. We Have Squandered the Good That God Graciously Gave
 - a. We ran away from God
 - i. The Son "journeyed to a land far away"
 - ii. He wanted to get far away from the Father and the Family
 - 1. Was it to make his own name?
 - b. We lived selfishly
 - i. "lavish" – prodigal
 - ii. On ourselves!
 - iii. What was his (our) problem?
 - 1. Sin
 - 2. We were created for the joyful worship of God. This is what humanity was made to be. Yet, man desired knowledge more than life, and we became self-centered rather than God-centered. When we did this, i.e. sin, we alienated ourselves from God, and every relationship was therefore ruined: from each other, and even from ourselves. Self-centering only leads to the destruction of every relationship, ironically even with our own soul.
 - c. We spent ourselves on worthless promisors
 - i. The son thought that he had joy, but he only had pleasure
 - ii. But they only "loved" him when he had something to give to them
 - iii. When he couldn't perform to their satisfactions any longer, they left him
 - iv. God reveals need
 - 1. Famine in that country indicates the hand of God
 - 2. For in the OT, famine was a discipline of God and the elements are certainly and absolutely under the sovereign command of God
 - 3. If we never realized our situation, our lostness, our need, then we would never return home, so God graciously reveals our need
 - a. This is what the Spirit of God does in the work of regeneration
 - b. He opens our eyes to our inability, he slays us with the Law
 - c. Paul says that the Law is our "tutor" – our tough unbending schoolmaster that shows us our great need for Christ
 - i. Galatians 3:24-26
- 3. We Became Enslaved to the Things We Over-pursued
 - a. Not only did they not fulfill their promises, they used the man up until he was enslaved
 - i. Tim Keller:

"Sin reaps two terrible consequences. One consequence is spiritual bondage (Rom 6: 15–18). We may believe in God or we may not believe, but either way, we never make him our greatest hope, good, or love. We try to maintain control of our lives by living for other things — for money, career, family, fame, romance, sex, power, comfort, social and political causes, or something else. But the result is always a loss of control, a form of slavery. Everyone has to live for something, and if that something is not God, then we are driven by that thing we live for — by overwork to achieve it, by inordinate fear if it is threatened, deep anger if it is being blocked, and inconsolable despair if it is lost. He found himself enslaved to a master who didn't

care for him, who used him, who abused him, and who shamed him by placing him with the pigs”

- ii. The use of pigs in the story, in particular, is Jesus’ way of showing impurity, brokenness, and shame due to this slavery
- b. In the same way, the things to which we ran to make us something enslave us
 - i. How do we feel when we lose them? How’s your joy?
 - ii. How do we feel when a “famine” takes them away and reveals their inadequacy and transience?
 - iii. Our emotions reveal that we are ruled by them, that they demand that we sacrifice to them in order to feel good
 - 1. Work harder to receive that promotion
 - 2. Make sure your husband is happy and not upset and that your children are well-behaved so that people know that you’re a good wife and mother!
 - 3. Yell louder to get your point across, because if things don’t go your way you’ll be nothing, you are nothing!
 - 4. These things rule you when you have to have them.
 - a. It’s not that pleasure is bad, but when pleasure becomes your god it rules you and ruins you
 - b. It’s not that a happy husband is bad, but when the happiness of your husband becomes your god, it rules you and ruins your joy
 - iv. When we *must* have something more than God in order to bring us peace, joy, rest, etc. we are ruled by that thing
 - 1. There is no option of having no ruler. We all worship something and what we worship rules us.
 - 2. Enslaved to sin or enslaved to God – no option of enslaved to nothing.
 - a. The question the son was left with was simple: Who is the best ruler?

4. The Father Welcomes Back Sons, not Mere Slaves

- a. The Son “came to himself”
 - i. When you are alienated from God, you are also alienated from your own soul.
 - 1. You can’t know yourself when you’re running from the One who made you in his image.
 - 2. Thus, repentance is coming to God and coming to yourself because you come to the realization of where you came from and for whom you were made.
 - ii. When the son “came to himself” he figured that being a slave in His Father’s house would be better than a slave to cruel master
 - 1. He figured that his inheritance was gone, his sonship was gone, his honor was gone
 - 2. Thus, at least His father was a good master to his servants, rather than treating them like pigs
 - 3. So, he would return to his father with no demands, no entitlement, no expectations of sonship, but of merciful service
 - a. His attitude was that the crumbs of his father’s table are worth 10,000 worlds outside the house
 - iii. He knew that he was guilty and didn’t deserve anything from his father
 - 1. When he meets his father, he didn’t feel a sense of entitlement, that the father owed him a return
 - a. He came with an appeal for mercy with no expectations
 - b. He recognized that he deserved nothing before God or before his father
 - c. He did not expect the family to receive him, either

2. Yet he knew that his father was merciful and threw himself upon that mercy
- b. The Father responded with lavish shameless grace!
 - i. He saw the son coming from "far off"
 1. God is not so busy, demanding, or distracted as to be unconcerned about His wayward children
 2. He watches for them – Before anyone else notices, God sees with loving mercy.
 - ii. He "felt compassion"
 1. The Father is moved by his repentant son's return
 2. His "heart is turned over" for He longs for His son to know his love and to know where he belongs
 - iii. He ran shamelessly to meet him
 1. Dignified men don't run like this. This running is shameless, but God runs shamelessly to his returning children.
 2. God throws aside all dignity to meet you when you humbly turn for home's mercy
 - iv. He embraced him and kissed him
 1. What mercy is this? What love is this?
 - v. He poured out grace upon him *as his son*
 1. He commanded the servants to celebrate
 - a. He told others to serve him, when he came looking to be a servant
 - b. He honored him as a son again
 2. He robed him
 - a. He wrapped him in the clothes of sonship – 'the best robe'
 - b. He covered his poverty, foolishness, and shame with the clothes of the father's house
 3. He ringed him
 - a. He restored honor, wealth, position
 4. He shoed him
 - a. He provided for his real needs and his tiredness
 5. He killed the fattened calf
 - a. This is extravagant grace
 - b. One didn't eat meat a lot in those days because it was expensive
 - c. The fattened calf was usually reserved for wedding feasts and great and unique honors
 - d. The Father honors the son in his return, even though he treated him with contempt and wanted him dead
- c. God has run to meet you in Jesus Christ
 - i. God watches the horizon for his wayward idolatrous children to come home in humble repentance
 - ii. He bears up shame, running to meet you without dignity
 1. Jesus bore your shame, left his dignified position of honor in heaven to walk this earthen turmoil as a despised and unesteemed man
 2. He bore the shame of our death, cruel upon an excruciating cross
 - iii. He embraces you with lavish love, pouring out upon you His very own Holy Spirit
 - iv. He kisses his returning children with joyful mercy and extravagant prodigal grace
 - v. He robes you with the robes of sonship, the righteousness of Jesus applied to your life, the shoes of peace and provision for your tired souls
 - vi. He throws a party when one sinner comes to repentance, all expenses paid by the good Son, the firstborn Son, Jesus Christ

Though He is the righteous and holy God, commanding and powerful, and though He owes us nothing, He has emptied Himself of dignity in his expression of love for sinners. He pays for our shame and guilt. He swallows our cursed death. He robes our brokenness and shame with the just deeds of Jesus. This is the Father that Jesus reveals for sinners who have treated him contemptuously, enjoined ourselves to shameless self-centeredness, become enslaved by our foolish darkness, and have returned pleading for patient mercy and finding instead the full-speed embrace of the shameless God who runs to meet you, embrace you, kiss you, restore you, robe you clothe you, and celebrate with heaven that a lost child has returned. This is our shameless God who says, "This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again! He was lost and has been found!" This message of a God of such grace is good news, indeed, for foolish enslaved sinners like me. It seems fantastically good.