

Luke 15:1-3 sets the context for this parable—Jesus is talking to the Pharisees about sinners  
And about the joy in finding the lost

Last week we talked about this story Jesus told that is not at all something that would happen  
While we can imagine a son asking for his inheritance and the father giving it to him  
This was not something that would ever have happened to a Middle Eastern family  
The father acts completely out of character in letting his son go...

This scene opens with the younger son in the far country where he lives extravagantly  
Contrary to what some have thought, there is no indication of immoral living in the text itself  
Just that he spent his money freely, living the life of luxury as if there was no end to the money

But as he neared the end of his resources, a famine occurred  
As Americans—we only hear about famines in other countries  
It is hard to imagine the severe impact of a famine  
Jeremias records 10 famines in Israel between 169 BC and AD 70—a familiar fact of life  
No international relief agencies existed, particularly from another continent  
First place anyone would turn in difficult times is to the extended family—but not this man  
And his friends were friends only because of his generosity with money  
In spite of having wealth, he began to be in need and became a victim of the famine  
Survival is his basic need

The natural thing would be to go home, but he can't do that—he can't return home without wealth  
The conditions under which he left mean that he must succeed  
He can't return home until he has enough money to buy back the land he sold  
If he returns home as he is, he will incur public shame  
Shame before his father when he returns as a failure  
Shame before the village who would enact the "cutting off" ceremony if he comes home

Instead he attaches himself to a person who still has food and resources  
This is a humiliating act of "hanging on" to someone of position  
The person of wealth is a Gentile for he owns pigs  
He probably wants to get rid of this man that "hangs on" so assigns a demeaning task  
The stranger is a Jew so he won't herd the pigs—but he does!

At this point Kenneth Bailey<sup>1</sup> suggests what the Pharisees would have heard Jesus saying...

Pharisees: Rabbi Jesus, we don't think your doctrine of sin is serious. If it were, you would not eat with sinners.

Jesus: Gentlemen, I see that I have been misunderstood. I am sorry you think I have a faulty doctrine of sin. Please allow me to explain myself. In my view, sin is a very serious matter. The faults of sinners are not to be taken lightly. Perhaps an illustration will make my views clear. I think that sin and the sinner are like a young Jewish boy who tells his father to die by asking for his inheritance. He then sells his portion of the family estate with his father in good health and resident in the village. Beyond that, he travels

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*, Suggested conversation occurs on pages 126-127 in chapter 3, *The Good Father and His Two Lost Sons*, which is the basis of this message.

to a far country, loses the inheritance money to the Gentiles in a Greek city and ends up feeding pigs! This is my view!

Pharisees: Amazing! We had no idea! This young rabbi has a magnificent doctrine of sin. He has not set up a "straw man" to knock down. He has presented our theological position on the matter better than we could have done ourselves. This is exactly the way we feel about sinners!

By now the Pharisees are completely engaged with the story and liking it!

No law against herding pigs for Gentiles, only against eating pork or touching a carcass  
However, they would have questioned that he would have remained pure with the pigs  
Later the rabbinical law did forbid a Jew to feed the pigs  
Likely, Jesus' audience saw the prodigal son as one who broke the law  
But his greater problem is the offense he committed against family and community

The pods fed to the pigs were carob and not filling to a human being  
Pigs were able to digest them so he wishes that he were a pig so he could eat and be satisfied

Ultimately, the story says that no one gave the prodigal son anything to eat—he is hungry!!

*"When he came to himself" or "When he came to his senses"...*

Some think of this as repentance—new awareness of his failure and his confession  
But with 2 parables, Jesus has redefined repentance—as being found  
Neither the lost sheep or the lost coin did anything to be found  
The shepherd and the woman searched until they found them  
So why would Jesus suddenly change and say that it is something the son did—repent?  
Repentance is something done for that which is lost—for the person who is lost  
Not something the person does for him or herself—not in choosing to come home  
Instead, the prodigal son is making one more attempt to solve his problem and stay alive  
He has no one but himself to rely on

The son says to himself, why die if there is an alternative—because of the shame, this is a last resort!  
The craftsmen that work for my father have bread to eat and some left over  
Why shouldn't I have what they have?

The solution is clear—he must convince his father to train him as a self-supporting craftsman  
But first he must convince his father to support his plan

*"I have sinned against heaven and before you..."*

What Pharaoh confessed to Moses during the plague of locusts  
Pharaoh didn't have a change of heart—he wanted the plagues to stop  
The prodigal son isn't admitting sin, he knows he must say this to get his way  
He is not planning to live at home—he wants to learn a trade so he can pay his own way  
His father pays his craftsmen well—so he wants to be trained as a craftsman  
But he needs his father to pay for the training

Sometimes this is translated as a hired hand or a servant—but better as craftsman  
He is too proud to go home and beg to be a slave or servant  
Craftsmen were well paid—they had bread enough to spare  
After he is trained he can save money and restore his honor again

At this point the Prodigal Son story is following expected theological points

The Pharisees would have been happy with sin as described in the pig herding scene

Now the son is following the appropriate elements for repentance

1. Confession of sin
2. Compensation for the evil done
3. Sincerity in keeping the law previously broken

The prodigal son plans to keep all 3—confession, earn compensation, keep the law

Salvation will be his!! So he starts home!!

It will be hard going home—he has to persuade his father to fund the training

His brother will be angry and the community tradition of "cutting off" has to be faced

He lost the inheritance to Gentiles who keep pigs! About as bad as it gets

The audience agrees—if the son is careful and "does it right"—he will be restored

The sinner who fulfills these obligations will be accepted by God

They expect the ending of the story to fit their expectations...

He returns and is treated badly by the town with the feared "cutting off ceremony" enacted

After much humiliation, he reaches home, delivers his speech, negotiates with his father

Ultimately the father agrees and sends him away to another location for training

Once trained, he can work on the estate as a paid craftsman, living elsewhere

Eventually he will recover the lost inheritance so he can come home to live and be reconciled

I always assumed the family lived on the estate or farm out of town—father saw him but might be alone

But I find out that everyone lived in the village—a village with narrow streets and everyone close

Anything happened in the village and everyone knew about it

The father's house would be in the middle of the village

Father is watching for his son—he knows he will fail,

But he also knows he is too proud to return until all is lost—and will therefore return in rags

He also knows how the village people feel and about the "cutting off ceremony" they will do

So the father has a plan!! He will meet him before he gets to the village

Only the father can protect his son from the hostility of the village

The father sees him from a long ways off and goes to meet him

The father has compassion on his son—this is not how a Middle Eastern father would act

Should be stern and guard the honor of the family—he should exhibit anger with him

The father runs—again Middle Eastern gentlemen do not run

Besides being hard to run in long robes, a prominent man does not run

People saw him run and watch with curiosity this unfolding drama

The father put his arms around his son and kissed him

The prodigal son should fall on his face and kiss his father's feet

The kiss on the face is a gesture of acceptance and friendship—forgiveness, peace, love

For the son everything is backwards—instead of an angry village, he meets his father who kisses him

Now the Pharisees who are listening with attention find the story deviating—father welcomes his son

The father clearly symbolizes God and the father has just welcomed the sinner home!

The son begins his speech, still hoping his plan will work—but the father interrupts him  
If the son is allowed to proceed with his plan, there will be no authentic reconciliation  
For genuine reconciliation to occur, the son must be aware of what he has done  
Only when that awareness dawns on him will he see that he cannot solve this problem  
The assumption that he can pay money to compensate for rejecting love is to cheapen the pain  
    He can't buy back his father's love  
Genuine reconciliation can only be achieved through the father's love and compassion  
Only through this costly demonstration of pure love can the son begin to see himself  
In the face of this love, the son accepts being found and brought back into the family as son!  
    This is how Jesus defines repentance—the acceptance of being found!

Everyone is watching this unfold—the village has gathered round—the servants are present  
The father tells the servants to prepare a banquet in honor of the son  
At this point there can be no "cutting off ceremony" in the village  
The son sees clearly that the father has done the unthinkable for him, is humbled and grateful  
The servants are told to dress him in the best robe, a ring and sandals—as a true son  
    Do it quickly to cover his rags—cover his humiliation  
    The father treats him as if he had never left  
In killing a fatted calf, the father expects enough guests to eat it all—perhaps 200 people  
The father is not just expressing his own joy—he is formally reconciling the prodigal to himself  
The banquet itself is indicative of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners

The far country is that place where we try to figure it out on our own—and we all do that  
Whether through reckless spending—famine—feeding pigs—figuring out a way home  
Or simply trying to control my life and my circumstances  
    We all have found ourselves in a place where we are in charge and figuring it out  
    Sometimes the results seems ok, other times they fail miserably  
But it is in coming back home to the father—for whatever reason—good or bad  
    That we find our true home—  
    The father welcomes each of us and in that moment we are transformed  
    In that moment we see our true selves and know ourselves to be at the end of us  
    But in the face of God's pure love and compassion—we see that we are loved  
    Knowing that I can't do it alone and discovering that I don't have to is huge  
    God makes up for all the failings—God's love makes us whole—constant transformation

“Cease striving and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10 NASB

In God, I am enough

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13 NRSV