

## Luke 15

### The Forgiving Father

The possibility of a new beginning, a fresh start, another chance, the hope for something that would make life meaningful; it was because people sensed this possibility in his words and actions that they were drawn to Jesus Christ. There was something very different about Jesus, especially when he was explaining something about God. He presented a radically different picture of God than the one offered by the religious establishment.

He taught that God was his Father and He could be ours too. And he taught that God is not only holy and just and righteous, He is also full of compassion, love and mercy. To be honest with you Jesus wasn't teaching anything new about God. It was already revealed in many places in the Old Testament. For example Psalm 145 proclaims,

The Lord *is* gracious and full of compassion,  
Slow to anger and great in mercy.  
<sup>9</sup> The Lord *is* good to all,  
And His tender mercies *are* over all His works.  
(vv. 8, 9)

What was new about Jesus was that you could actually see God's heart in all that he said and did. Therefore, the outcasts and those looking for hope were attracted to Jesus Christ. And even some of the religious leaders were coming to faith in Jesus. But most of establishment grew more and more determined to kill him.

All of Luke 15 is Jesus Christ's response to the accusation of the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees that Jesus Christ could not be a man of God, because he received sinners and ate with them. The Pharisees and scribes loathed people who did not live up to their religious rules and traditions. Those people were ungodly sinners and God was surely not interested in them. What the scribes and Pharisees didn't understand was that in their self-righteousness they were sinners too. And God loved them and was in Christ offering them a new beginning too.

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners  
drew near to Him to hear Him. <sup>2</sup> And the  
Pharisees and scribes complained, saying,

“This Man receives sinners and eats with them.”  
Luke 15:1, 2)

The word “receives” seems so passive doesn't it? Jesus “receives sinners.” But the Greek word translated “receives” is a powerful word. It means to anxiously long for and eagerly await someone's arrival and then to be full of joy when he or she arrives. Think of a wife waiting at the airport for her soldier husband to return. That's how God feels about people when they turn to Him in faith.

God longs for sinners to be brought home into the family of God. And He desires to work in the lives of those already in the family to fill their hearts with peace and joy. So here in Luke 15, Jesus told three parables about being lost and found. The third story is a parable about two lost sons and a forgiving Father.

Then He said: “A certain man had two sons.  
<sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to *his* father,  
'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls  
*to me.*' So he divided to them *his* livelihood.  
(Luke 15:11, 12)

According to Jewish law at the time, a father could release his estate before his death. But it was rarely done. The young son's request then was shocking and dishonoring to his father. His request was the equivalent of saying that he wished his dad was dead. That's how some people feel about God. They wish He wasn't there. Then they could live as they please without any sense of duty or obligation. Despite the disrespect the father gave his youngest son his inheritance. And he gave the oldest son his share too.

And not many days after, the younger son  
gathered all together, journeyed to a far  
country, and there wasted his possessions  
with prodigal living.  
(Luke 15:13)

The phrase “prodigal living” means extravagantly wasteful—thus a wasted life. The young son spent his inheritance and his life on everything the world said was fun and fashionable, on everything that would make one a success. But in pursuit of the good life, real life was slipping away.

But when he had spent all, there arose a  
severe famine in that land, and he began

to be in want. <sup>15</sup> Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup> And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything*.  
(Luke 15:14-16)

Sooner or later our choices bring consequences. This certainly wasn't what the young man expected. Now, if Jesus had stopped his story at this point he would have won the approval of the Pharisees and scribes. "Yeah, that's right! That's what happens to sinners. They get stuck in the pig pen." The Pharisees were happy to leave sinners in the pig pen. But the savior wants them to come home and begin again.

But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"   
(Luke 15:17-19)

Verse 17 begins, "But when he came to himself." In other words he came to his senses. There is an insanity to sin. There is a mental derangement to ungodly thinking. This is why some people put up a fight and protest to protect salamanders, but turn around and promote aborting a baby after its born. But finding himself in the pig pen, this young man saw his reality and it shook him.

When you are alienated from God you are always alienated from the person you should be. And it is difficult to relate properly to other people, because without God we all tend to be self-centered. You and I were created to be in the image of God and when we run from him, we lose out. This young man is going to go home and confess his sin. But his proposal shows that while he desires his father's house, he still does not understand his father's heart.

And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in

your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'  
(Luke 15:20, 21)

What a glorious picture we have here! While the son was still a great way off his father ran to meet him and kissed him until his lips were chapped. Clearly every day the father had looked down that road to see if his son was coming home. Jesus Christ was telling his audience that this is what God is like. Jesus is telling us that because of the love of God toward us there is always hope. There can always be a new beginning. The love of God is the magnificent attribute that sets Him above everything. God is not so busy that He is not concerned with those who are alienated from Him. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ to seek and to save those who are lost.

And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'<sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet.'<sup>23</sup> And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry;<sup>24</sup> for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.  
(Luke 15:21-24)

This son is ready to be a hired servant. But the focus here is in the incredible joy and generosity of the father. Do not feel hopeless. Never feel that you cannot begin again. Get up. Leave the swine and come to God. The greatness of the father's love in this parable changed everything. He strips the young man of his tattered rags and gives him the best robe. He removes every trace of the far country. He wiped out the past and enabled the son to make a new beginning. There is not a single word of rebuke by the father. He simply pours out his love and joy because his child is home

I can imagine Jesus pausing in the story now as he looked deeply into the eyes of the sinners and tax collectors. His warm smile inviting them all to come home—the Father is waiting. And then with the same love Jesus Christ turned towards the self-righteous Pharisees to continue the story.

Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.<sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.  
<sup>27</sup> And he said to him, 'Your brother has come,

and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' <sup>28</sup> "But he was angry and would not go in.  
(Luke 15:25-28a)

The oldest son's attitude (although understandable) is a picture of the self-righteous, judgmental hearts of the Pharisees. This son, like the Pharisees, stays close to home. But he has no love for the father, no compassion for his once outcast brother and no sense of his own sin. And again, as with the younger son, it is the father who reaches out with love.

But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'  
(Luke 15:28-30)

The older son's response to his father reveals a lot about his heart. He said, "Lo, these many years I have been serving you." It is interesting. The Greek word for "serving" is not the normal word for work. It is the word for being a slave. In other words, in his mind, he has not been working along with his father, but slaving away. And he claims that his father has never given him anything. But remember when the father gave his young son his inheritance the older son received his too.

There are times when we can be like the older son. If you have been a Christian for a while it is all too easy to get caught up in the work of being a Christian and lose the joy of fellowship with your Father. It is all too easy to say to God "What have You done for me lately?" It is all too easy to forget what we have been saved from. It is all too easy to feel scorn for sinners, to lose compassion and not rejoice when they are eager to be saved. It is all too easy to become judgmental. Now Jesus finishes the story.

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'"  
(Luke 15:31, 32)

What will the older son do? Will there be a new beginning for him as well? Jesus never finishes that part of the story. We need to understand that God actively seeks to bring all people into His kingdom. We are told in 1 Timothy 2:4, 5 that God

desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus who gave Himself a ransom for all.

God wants us to be saved and to know the truth. The young son didn't know the truth about the world until he was in the pig pen. But the truth of God's love and His Word will set us free and keep us free.

Sometimes we are like the prodigal son. We doubt the goodness of God and so we leave God and go out and try to find life and happiness by other means. If we are like that we need to come to our senses and return to God. I am a prodigal every time I search for life and joy apart from God. At other times we are like the older brother. Our sins are not as obvious as they used to be. We've learned to play religious.

But there is a great danger in becoming self-righteous. It makes us blind to our own faults. It keeps us from welcoming repentant sinners home. And it robs us of joy. But with God—with the Father, there is always the possibility of a new beginning, a fresh start, another chance.

There is always hope. Jesus Christ knew this that day he told the story. It is why he told the story. And he also knew on that day that the cross would come. And that through the cross he would make a way for us all to come home.