

**Come and Listen:**  
**What Does God Look Like?**  
**Luke 15:1-32**

**June 24, 2018**

**Dr. Steve Horn**

**Text Introduction:** We are in a series for the summer on the Parables of Jesus. Jesus was a master story teller. People of Jesus' day were not really any different from people of today in the sense that they related to stories. Jesus took these stories using the familiar things of everyday life in the first century to capture the attention of His listeners.

When we encounter parables in the Gospels, there are a few basic interpretative principles that we must employ in order to get the real meaning of the text.

1. Understand the purpose of all parables. The literal meaning of the word parable is "to throw beside" or "to set beside." Jesus used parables to throw beside a teaching or an instructive principle. That leads us to the second consideration.
2. We must seek to understand what that principle is. "What is the main point" is the question we should be asking. Most times, if not all times, there is something in the context that reveals precisely what the main point is and the story simply illustrates that main point.
3. Because we are looking for the main point, it is also important to understand that we need not press the details of the story, but rather seek to get the main point.
4. I also want to remind us that often times we will discover the main point in the unusual detail of the story. Remember, this is the hook that would grab the attention. (And, we must do that from a first century perspective, not a twenty-first century perspective.)

It would seem odd to have a series on the Parables of Jesus without considering the most familiar of all of the parables, so "Come and Listen" to the Parable of the Prodigal Son or as I prefer to call it "The Parable of the Lost Son."

In order to truly understand this parable, it is important to hear the two shorter parables that set the stage for the longer parable.

**Text:** All the tax collectors and sinners were approaching to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and scribes were complaining, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "What man among you, who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open field and go after the lost one until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> When he has found it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, <sup>6</sup> and coming home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!' <sup>7</sup> I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don't need repentance.

<sup>8</sup> "Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors

together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found the silver coin I lost!' <sup>10</sup> I tell you, in the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who repents."

<sup>11</sup> He also said: "A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate I have coming to me.' So he distributed the assets to them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all he had and traveled to a distant country, where he squandered his estate in foolish living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he had nothing. <sup>15</sup> Then he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to eat his fill from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one would give him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I'll get up, go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. <sup>19</sup> I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.'" <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> "But the father told his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let's celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he summoned one of the servants, questioning what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother is here,' he told him, 'and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

<sup>28</sup> "Then he became angry and didn't want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he replied to his father, 'Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.'

<sup>31</sup> "'Son,' he said to him, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

**Introduction:** A group of psychologists recently conducted a study on 551 Americans on what they believed God looked like. Each of the participants were randomly shown two pictures and asked to choose which, in their opinion, most looked like to them the "face of God." From those different selections, a composite image was constructed. I knew you would be interested so here is the final composite sketch. (Reported by Jim Denison quoting an article from *The Charlotte Observer*, June 12, 2018) **Show picture here!**

When I read that story I recalled the story that I have told about the little boy who was busily drawing a picture when his teacher asked him, "What are you drawing?"

"God," he answered.

His teacher said in return, "That's impossible, no one has seen God. No one knows what God looks like."

Undeterred, the little boy fired back, “They will when I am finished.”

Indeed, we cannot know what God looks like physically or even for that matter if He even has a physical description, but it seems to me that in Luke 15 we get a great description of God—maybe the best description of all of what God looks like.

Luke 15, in many ways, is the heart of the Gospel of Luke. When I teach on the whole book of Luke, I offer that the thesis of Luke is found in Luke 19:10—“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.” The content of Luke 15 is three parables—the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. The three parables in Luke 15 should be read as one unit. Each of the three parables builds on the other. The context of the parables is the grumbling of the Pharisees in 15:2. The common denominator in the three parables is the joy associated with finding something of value that is lost. Jesus used these three parables as a progression. In the first two parables (a lost sheep and a lost coin), Jesus established that celebration occurs when a lost object of value is found. The third and final parable advances the truth because the lost object is a person—a beloved son. The first two parables really set-up the third parable. In each case, something of value is lost.

To God, every person is a person of value.

### **The Surprises of this Story:**

Before we get to the application, let me just take a couple of moments to help you to understand the details of this story. Jesus’ use of the parable is more than just simple illustration of spiritual truth. Jesus used the parable to capture the attention of his hearers. The way that he captured attention is to present a story that would be almost opposite of cultural expectations of His day. The “surprises” of His story would arrest the attention of the hearers.

As I understand it, there are a number of very unusual cultural features of this story.

- Asking for the inheritance early—This is more than a selfish and greedy boy. This is a boy who is saying, “You are as good as dead to me.”
- Among the swine—In Jesus’ day, speaking to Pharisees, nothing could be worse than a boy working, yea, even longing to eat among the pigs in a foreign land. Culturally speaking, he cannot be worse than having broken the fifth commandment (honor father and mother), living in Gentile territory, working among ceremonially unclean pigs, longing to eat what they eat, but not even being able to do that. He is as far away from home as he could get.
- The Father’s Acceptance—Perhaps what often gets overlooked in this story is the father’s reaction. We kind of get caught up in our 21<sup>st</sup> century look at this family and consider the joy of the boy’s return. In the first century world, for a father to show emotion toward an obedient son would be out of the ordinary. For a father to run and embrace and kiss his wayward son was something not just unheard of, but unimaginable.
- The Meal—Meat was rarely eaten, let alone butchering an entire calf.

All of these details arrest the attention of the Pharisees. What is this man saying?

### **What is He Saying to Us?**

- God longs for relationship to us.

You will never get beyond the love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy of God. The father's response in this story is breath-taking grace. Both sons were disobedient. The actions of the younger son show his obvious disobedience. Ultimately, the son in asking for his inheritance has said to the father, "You are as good as dead to me."

But the actions of the older son, though not as obvious, indicate the same kind of disobedience. The older son's actions upon the younger brother's return show that his obedience has been a cold obedience. He is working, obeying the commands, but when the chips were down, we see his true heart. When he said, "This son of yours" (v. 30) he is essentially saying, "he's not my brother, which translates into "you are not my father."

"What constituted sonship for each of these shamefully disobedient sons? Certainly not acts of obedience, for these were betrayed by a cold heart! More certain still, not being born sons, for their behavior belied that reality and forfeited that legal right. What in the parable constituted sonship for both of these sons? The reality of sonship is found in the gracious word of the forgiving father, which reconstituted sonship after the sonship was broken. That the father said so (my son in v. 31) was the reality of creating sonship, not who they were born nor what they did. The word of the father alone made them sons....So who was really lost here? The younger son who returned home, or the elder son who refused to go in and celebrate?" (Gerald Stevens, *The Theological Educator*, Fall 1997), 75.)

Again, you will never get beyond the love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and longing for relationship that the Father has for you. This is the reason for Jesus' coming—to seek and to save the lost.

- Because of this, He rejoices over everyone who is reconciled to Him.

As someone has said, "Let one child consent to be dressed in righteousness and begin the journey home and heaven pours the punch, strings the streamers, and throws the confetti."

It's the common denominator in all three stories. That ought to give us a great clue as to the primary meaning of this parable.

- The route to reconciliation is His grace which is evidenced by repentance.

I am not sure that we will find anywhere else in Scripture a better picture of what the Biblical nature of repentance is than what we find in the picture from the younger son. Notice that repentance is a change of . . .

- Attitude—"He came to his senses." He changed his mind.
- Actions—He got up. Sometimes, we change our mind about sin, but never change our actions regarding sin.
- Affections—He changed what he loved.

In sum, repentance is a change of desires accompanied by a change of direction!

- As recipients of His grace, we join Him in begging others to be reconciled and then rejoicing over those who are.

Here's a great word found in 2 Corinthians 5:21. "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: 'Be reconciled to God.'"

### **The Gospel Summarized: FAITH**

The intentional evangelism strategy and tool that we teach as a church is called "FAITH." By the way, we will begin a new semester of training on August 14. I believe that every Christian ought to be formally trained in some means and method of sharing the Gospel. Anyway, the tool is called "FAITH" because it uses the word "faith" as an acrostic to share the Gospel story. It occurred to me this week that this parable incorporates all of those elements. Let me share it with you.

### **Forgiveness**

We are all in need of forgiveness. The older son and the younger son were both in need of forgiveness. Some think they have no need for forgiveness. Others think what they have done is so terrible that they could never be forgiven.

### **Available**

The wonderful good news is that in Jesus, forgiveness is available. As we say in the Gospel presentation, forgiveness is available to all, but it is not automatic. Forgiveness is available to all, but not all choose to receive God's forgiveness.

### **Impossible**

Outside of Christ, His person and His work on the cross which paid the penalty for our sin, and because of His resurrection, it would be impossible to be reconciled to God.

### **Turn**

So, we must be willing to turn, to repent.

### **Heaven**

And, if we are willing, there will be the biggest party you have ever seen in heaven.

Here's what God looks like. It's the Father saying, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate!"