

The Surprising Heart of God

Luke 15:11-32

We are reading through the NT and in Luke now, and just yesterday you read Luke 15. Many of you are familiar with this passage because I preached a series on it several years ago and used it last year during the Covid pandemic.

It contains the heart of the gospel, and it also presents the two major misunderstandings about the gospel. This makes it hard to ignore and not address, even though we are very familiar with it.

Often, it is familiarity with things that makes us miss what is important about them. This makes it hard to preach. How can I say new things that retain your interest in this well-known story and still remain faithful to Jesus's intent for the story?

If we read it carefully, it is one of the most surprising, astonishing, shocking stories in the Bible.

First: The Context of the Story. 1-2

The three stories that Jesus tells in this chapter are a response to vs 1-2. None of the stories can be fully understood, appreciated, or applied without first looking at the context.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

- The Pharisees were the Law-keepers who encouraged others to do the same.
- Scribes were copyists, editors, teachers, and jurists who interpreted and regulated Jewish laws.

Over the centuries, these well-meaning groups lost the vision for their existence.

As Jesus's popularity increases the religious rulers of the day set themselves against him, some sincerely and other insincerely.

- Some people thought he really did blaspheme the Sabbath by healing (Jn 3)
- Some people were jealous that Jesus redirected Israel's allegiance (16:14)

Sadly, the Pharisees and scribes had lost touch with their real purposes and the people.

Second: Two Prodigal Sons & Two Prodigal Ways.

a) **The Younger Son** – Find God Your Own Way in Unrighteousness - 11-24

- Pharisees are surprised – the younger son reveals that he wants his father dead - 12
- Scribes are astonished – the father grants his wish – 13a
- This is how he ‘finds God.’ – liberality – 13b-14
- Pharisees are shocked– the younger son has the gall to return – 17-20
- Scribes are appalled – the father forgives and restores him – 22-24

IMP: Evidently, the ‘find God your own way’ doesn’t work.

b) **The Older Son** – Finding God in Self-Righteousness/Religion - 25-32

- Pharisees are justified – the older son is a hard worker & obedient – 29a
- Scribes are surprised – the father never celebrated him – 29b
- Pharisees are angered – the father honored the younger son – 30

(30 – “*But when this son of yours came*” = Pharisees and scribes’s attitude toward sinners)

- Scribes are justified – the father gives his inheritance to the elder son – 31

IMP: Evidently the “find your God the religious way” doesn’t work either.

The story illustrates that there are two ways to run from God; irreligion and religion; immorality and morality, self-discovery, and self-flagellation. But neither gets you to God.

If neither way, irreligion or religion, unrighteousness, or self-righteousness, doesn’t get us to God, what hope do we have?

Third: The Father’s Heart for Each of his Children

- Both sons are out of fellowship with the father
- Neither son is looking for the father
- Both sons are looking out for themselves
- Both sons are out of fellowship with the father and each other
- Both sons are ‘prodigal’ = wasteful
 - The younger prodigal wasted the father’s living
 - The elder prodigal wasted living with the father

What we really have here is a picture of God’s heart vs the human heart

Our hearts are failing (in every way)

His heart is faithful

We are self-loving

God is sacrificially loving

An example of this: Who should have gone after the younger brother? The elder brother. How do I know this? Our elder brother came after us. But he didn't because he didn't love him and because

v 31 – “*all that is mine is yours*” and the older brother wasn't going to spend one dime of his money on that younger prodigal. That's why he's so upset about the fatted calf. It's his.

- f) vs 3-7 – The Shepherd looks for his sheep
- g) vs 8-10 – The woman looks for her coin
- h) v 20 – The Father runs to the younger son and restores him – 22-23
- i) v 28 – The Father goes out to the older son and tries to restore him

How do we get to God? The Father's way! But what is the Father's way?

Ephesians 2:4 - *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved -*

Fourth: There is no ending to the story –

15:1-2 - *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*

- a) The younger son is reconciled to the father – 24 – This are the tax collectors and sinners who are coming to Jesus – v 1a
- b) The older son still outside – 28f – This is the pharisees and scribes who are complaining that tax collectors and sinners, younger brothers, are coming to Jesus and he is accepting them – v1b

Three important points. It's important to know that -

- a) We cannot make/find a way to God
- b) God has come looking for us
- c) The invitation is still being given

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Conclusion:

There are two ways to run from God; irreligion and religion; immorality and morality, self-discovery, and self-flagellation. But neither gets you to God.

- a) We are like sheep who are easily lost
- b) We are like coins who can't find their way back
- c) We are like sons who don't love the Father

There is only one way to get to God, to repent of your own way and trust his heart.

- Jesus tells this story so the tax collectors and sinners will know they can come.
- He tells this story so the Pharisees and scribes will come.

No matter who you are – tax collector, sinner, Pharisee, scribe; you can come to Jesus. Will you?

Community Groups:

- 1 – Who hears Jesus tell this story?
- 2 – For whose benefit is he telling it?
- 3 – What does this story tell us about tax collectors and sinners?
- 4 – What does this story tell us about Pharisees and scribes?
- 5 – What does this story tell us about God?
- 6 – What does this story tell us about how tax collectors and sinners treat Pharisees and scribes, and visa-versa?
- 6 – What does this story tell us about how we try to get to God?
- 7 – What does this story tell us about how we can/do get to God?
- 7 – What do all three stories have in common? (Something is lost, and Someone comes looking)
- 8 – Before you were a Christian, which were you: tax collector/sinner or Pharisee/scribe?
- 9 – Why didn't the elder prodigal look for his younger brother?
- 10 – What is so offensive about the young prodigal's request?
- 11 – What is so surprising about the father's response to that request?
- 12 – What is so surprising about the elder prodigal's response to his brother's return?
- 13 – What is so surprising about the father's response to the younger prodigal's return?
- 14 – What is so surprising about father's response to the elder brother's stubbornness?
- 15 – Why does Jesus *not* finish the story?