

## **The Story – Parable of the Lost Son**

What a wonderful time we had this past week with Tim and Rochelle Enloe. I am thankful to the Lord for all of you who were baptized in the Holy Spirit and for all of us that experienced the refreshing of the Lord in those services. We look forward to having them back when their schedule will allow. I encourage you to keep seeking the Lord and His abiding presence.

This morning we are back to our year long series, The Story, the unfolding story of God's redemption. We are in the New Testament and just finished looking at some of the wonderful miracles of Jesus. The next four Sundays we are looking at some of the parables of Jesus. A parable is defined as a simple short story from which a moral lesson can be drawn. This was part of Jesus' teaching style. He often told stories drawn from familiar settings and circumstances, using them to illustrate a spiritual truth. Matthew tells us, **“Jesus spoke all these to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.’” Matthew 13:34-35**

One thing about parables, they often communicate one big, basic truth. Be careful not to read more into the story than Jesus intended. Not every detail of the story necessarily has a spiritual meaning or significance. Look for the big themes, the big story of the parable.

With that said, turn to Luke 15 and I want us to look at one of the greatest of Jesus' parables and perhaps one of the greatest stories in the bible or in all of literature. This is the story we call The Prodigal Son. Notice this parable is prefaced by two other parables about lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin and finally this parable of a lost son.

Let's read **Luke 15:11-32** Notice Luke said, “Jesus continued...” He was making this point about God being the one who looks for and rejoices in the safe return of the lost, whether a lost sheep, a lost coin or a lost son! Let's look at some lessons from this great parable.

**It's all about choices!** At the heart of it, it's a story about choices. Bad and good. The younger son made a bad choice. So did the elder son when his wayward brother came home and he refused to go into the party. The father made a redemptive choice when he welcomed his son home and restored a broken relationship. But it all started with a choice by the younger son.

In Israel at that time the eldest son would get a larger portion of the inheritance. The older brother would essentially get 2/3 and the younger brother would get 1/3. However, to ask for the

inheritance before their father was dead would have been unthinkable. It would be a huge insult to the father. It was like saying, “I wish you were already dead, but since you won’t indulge me and die, how about just giving me my share, I’ll act like you’re dead and I’ll be gone.”

You might ask, shouldn’t the father in this parable have refused to honor the request of his son? He must have known his son wasn’t ready to handle an inheritance. Jesus didn’t say, but I’m sure he tried to convince him to wait. He reasoned with him and appealed to him but the younger son was insistent. Perhaps the father knew, based on the boy’s lousy attitude and disrespect, that whether he stayed or left home, he had likely lost his son. Whatever the reason, the father gave the younger son his inheritance. Which brings us to this question, “Since God knows how it will all end, shouldn’t he refuse to give us what we ask for if we are going to end up in a pig pen like the prodigal?” The truth is, we all have a free will. God takes this incredible risk and allows us to choose whether we will live for him and serve him or if we will choose to live for ourselves and serve ourselves. God doesn’t force you to live for him. He gives us the power to choose. He does however give us information if we’ll pay attention. He warns us of the outcomes of our choices. He sends a pastor to tell you Sunday after Sunday what will happen if you make bad choices. He sends friends and counselors to warn us. But in the end he treats us with so much respect and dignity that he allows us to choose, if we wish, to ignore all the warnings and go ahead and make our bad choice but then remember, free will means we get to live with the consequences.

God has given you the incredible power of a choice. How are you using it? What kind of choices are you making? And where will those choices take you? For the prodigal son, his choices took him to a distant country, to a place of desolation and despair. The bible says, **“The younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.”**

The boy set off for a distant country. It sounds like he had a plan and it was to get as far away from his father and his father’s house and his father’s rules and his brother’s self-righteous criticism. He thought he was traveling to a land of independence and freedom, free of his

father's rules and ideas, but he ends up someplace he never thought he would be. Not just in a far away and foreign land, but in a pig pen.

Maybe you can relate to this young man. You've never fed pigs, but perhaps you are asking yourself this morning, "How in the world did I get here?" No one started out hoping to be an alcoholic. No one dreamed of becoming a meth addict or a sex addict. No one started out planning to cheat on your spouse and destroy your marriage and family. No young girl dreamed of being a single mom with a dead-beat ex-husband that spends his time with his "boys" but not with his kids. How did you get here? It was choices. One after another that took you farther and farther away from home and into that distant country. You are somewhere you never intended to be. It isn't home and it isn't where you belong!

He wandered so far from home, from God, from who he used to be. He squandered everything he had. All of his inheritance was gone now. And you know what? It wasn't just his money that was gone. He lost that all right, but he also lost his reputation, his innocence, his integrity, his character, his good name, a clear conscience, a clean heart, his relationship with God. He lost everything. He wasted it all, that's what squandering means.

The bible tells us he hired himself out to a citizen of that distant land and that man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. Pigs were unclean animals according to Jewish law and the Jews were not allowed to eat them or to even touch them and now this Jewish kid is having to feed them and basically living with them.

There is a picture here we need to see. People every day decide to walk away from God, from the church, from obeying God's word, thinking they've found what they're looking for in the world, living like everyone else, living as they please. "I don't need God and Mom and Dad's archaic rules. I've found my way with new friends, a new lifestyle, new ideas." I'm not saying those new friends are maliciously trying to hurt you, but hear what I'm telling you. Sooner or later, the citizens of that far distant country you've run to, the citizens you've attached yourself to, they are going to ask you to do something that violates your values, your standards, that violates what you were taught and what you know in your heart to be the truth. Again, they may not be doing it maliciously, maybe they just won't understand why it should be a problem for you because they are citizens of this earthly kingdom instead of a heavenly kingdom, but sooner or later, they will ask you to feed the pigs. It will happen. Jesus said he was sending us out as sheep among wolves and I don't care how much the wolves tell you they love you and

they will protect you and care for you, sooner or later you will start looking like lamb chops to the wolves. Don't be deceived.

Here is this boy, sitting in a pig pen, starving, thinking about eating the slop he was feeding to the hogs. He has lost everything when he begins to think about home and he comes to an important realization: **It's not too late!** Even though he is in the worst possible situation. Even though he is broke, homeless, starving, feeling hopeless, it's not too late. He can change his situation and so can you! Regardless of how things may appear today, it's not too late for you. There is hope, even when you are at the bottom. Even when you've lost everything, there is still hope. It's not too late. Then what do you do? Do what the prodigal son did.

**“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my Father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father.” Luke 15:17-20**

What did he do? The bible says he came to his senses. He came to himself. You know what he did? He faced the truth. Here's your first step: **Face the truth.** Stop believing the devil. Stop lying to yourself. Admit where you are. This isn't how I'm supposed to be living. I'm not fooling anyone but myself and I'm tired of being a fool. Face the truth. Then...

**Confess the truth.** Not only face the truth, confess it. Admit it. “I've sinned against heaven and against others, against myself, against my wife or husband, against mom and dad. I've sinned and I admit it. I need forgiveness. I need a Savior. I need Jesus to help me because I can't do this on my own.” Then what do you do?

**Get up.** I just said you can't do this on your own, but you have to decide on your own that you are going to get up out of the pig pen and say goodbye to the influences and choices that put you there in the first place. Thinking about going home, thinking about turning to Jesus and asking for his forgiveness isn't enough. You will have to get up and move toward him! You'll have to get up and get out of the pig pen. This isn't where God intended you to be. This isn't how he intended for you to live. Get up! But just getting up isn't enough either. Then what?

**Go to your Heavenly Father.** This boy headed home to his earthly father, ready to ask for forgiveness. It's time for you to get up from the sin you are living in and go home to your heavenly Father. He is waiting for you. Watching for you. He alone can save and restore you.

You start thinking about going home and the more you think the more uneasy you get. “God won’t forgive me, not after all the sin and the bad choices I’ve made. Not after all the times I walked away from his mercy. Not after all the chances he’s given me. I’m ashamed to go home to my heavenly Father and ask for forgiveness again. But look at the story. **“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him, he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Luke 15:20**

It may be my favorite image and picture in the bible, that of this father welcoming his lost son home! He says, “Let’s have a feast and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” It is a favorite image for me, but it would have been an unfamiliar image to those listening to Jesus’ parable. They would have been ready for the story to end back in verse 16 when it says he longed to eat what he was feeding the pigs and no one gave him anything. The listeners would have felt he got exactly what he deserved. The elder brother would get the 2/3rds of the estate that was due him and the father would be done with an irresponsible and irreverent son. No charity or compassion should be shown for those who make such poor choices. But that’s not the story Jesus told. My Israeli friend Yehudah always says, “Phil, one thing we Jews have learned from you Christians: compassion.” The story didn’t end in verse 16 for this prodigal son and it doesn’t have to end there for us, either.

Compassion shows itself in the arms and actions of the father as he receives his son and welcomes him home. Notice the son repents! He asks for forgiveness, humbly, with true repentance. “I’m not worthy, just let me be like one of your hired hands.” The elder brother would have agreed with that whole-heartedly. “Put him to work as one of the hired hands. Make him earn his way back. He squandered his share of the estate so make him work to pay us back the money he owes us, but don’t forgive him outright and show him mercy.” But the father has a different plan. He receives him back as a son. He covers his rags with a robe, probably the Father’s own robe. The ring he puts on his son’s finger is no doubt a family signet ring, indicating he is re-instated as a member of the family, as a son. He puts shoes on his feet because slaves went barefoot but sons wore shoes.

The son is home, he asks for forgiveness and the Father grants him that forgiveness. The elder brother refuses to forgive, refuses to rejoice with the Father. That’s another sermon, but let me just point out a couple of other things as we close the message.

The son is home and has been forgiven. That's us as we come to the father and he puts the robe of his righteousness on us and a ring on our finger showing we are forgiven and we are part of his family. Here is what you need to hear: **He has forgiven you. Accept his forgiveness and live like it!** Never forget that he forgave you and showed you his mercy, but live like you are a forgiven, redeemed child of your Heavenly Father. Live so that you never bring reproach on your gracious Father again. Receive and accept his forgiveness and don't even think of going back to the pig pen.

One more thing. What about his inheritance? The fact is, he wasted it and there wasn't another. He wouldn't get another third when his father died. He would bear the consequences of his sin, but it didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the blessings of the Father and his renewed relationship all the rest of his life.

Listen, some things are lost and gone and won't be recovered. You can't get your inheritance back. You can't get your innocence back. The memories of the pig pen may be there and may haunt you for the rest of your life. It's why it is better to never go there in the first place. Make wise and God-honoring choices, but don't let the memory of the pig pen rob you of the blessing of the Father's forgiveness and his embrace. He is waiting to welcome you home from that long journey to a distant place. Face the truth. Confess the truth. Get up from that place and get to the Father! That's a choice you can live with forever and ever.