

Luke 15:1-3, 11-24  
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### **Scandalous Love**

(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

Today, and next Sunday, we have the great privilege of listening to Jesus of Nazareth as He tells what many people history consider to be the greatest story ever told. It is recorded for us by Luke the Physician in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel that bears his name. Luke 15 has been called "the gospel within the Gospel." And rightly so! For in Luke 15 we have the good news of Jesus Christ in its "purest form," so to speak. Especially in the parable usually called "the Prodigal Son." We will discover that this should be called "the Prodigal Sons." And, we will discover that it might be more accurately called "the Prodigal Father."

Many of us in this room have heard the parable many times, yet like me, long to hear it again and again. Many preachers have preached this parable many times, yet like me, long to preach it again and again. One day we are really going to believe what Jesus reveals in it!

Now, the parable, the story has redemptive power in any cultural setting: Canadian, British, American, Mexican, Brazilian, South African, Asian. But the story really comes alive and does its redemptive work in us when it is heard in the original context in which Jesus first told it, when it is heard in its Middle-Eastern cultural context.

Whenever we read Jesus' story we need to remember that Jesus first taught it to Pharisees and scribes. It was not spoken to the crowds. And, we need to remember that Jesus told the story to justify behaviours that the Pharisees and scribes judged to be scandalous, to justify actions the religious leadership judged to be shameful.

Who are the scribes and Pharisees with whom Jesus seems to always be in conflict, in trouble? The scribes are the professional theologians of the day: the seminary professors and ecclesiastical lawyers, the bishops and district superintendants. They were entrusted with the task of teaching and protecting the law of God and all the oral traditions assembled around the law. It was incumbent upon their office to interrogate Jesus regarding His teaching.

The Pharisees are the devout lay leaders of the day: the deacons and elders, the Sunday School teachers and Committee chairs. They were committed to keeping and obeying the Law of God, and the 631 additional regulations developed around the basic ten commandments.

Now, although the scribes and Pharisees have received rather bad press, we must not too quickly dismiss them. They were well motivated. They wanted to be holy; they wanted to be pleasing to God; they wanted to help others be holy. The problem was their concept of holiness. For them holiness meant conformity to rules; one achieves holiness by keeping rules and regulations. They missed the point. Holiness cannot be legislated. Holiness comes from relationship ... relationship with the Holy One. And that relationship cannot be initiated or sustained by mere conformity to rules.

Now, here is the critical fact to keep in mind when reading Jesus' story. The scribes and Pharisees thought of themselves as the protectors of Israel's Law ... and therefore, protectors of the reputation of Israel's God. As far as they were concerned, Jesus of Nazareth was shaming that reputation. At issue was the character of the Holy God.

Who are these "sinners" and tax-collectors with whom Jesus seems to always be in company? The tax-collectors were Jews working for the Roman government. They would buy the right to collect taxes in a specific region. As long as they delivered the agreed upon amount of money to the Romans, they were free to create any other taxes they wanted to. They were, therefore, "ripping off" their fellow Jews.

The word "sinners" is the Pharisees' word. Jesus never addresses anyone with this word. It refers to people who broke the Law. Such people were considered "unclean," and ostracized by those who thought of themselves as law-keepers.

Sinners and tax-collectors flocked to Jesus. That's an understatement! They could tell there was something different about the Nazarene Rabbi. They wanted to be near Jesus. And... *scandal of scandals* ... Jesus wanted to be near them! Luke says "Jesus received them", "welcomed them." The word Luke uses literally means "to welcome into fellowship" – to welcome as a member of one's own family.

But the really scandalous and shameful thing for the scribes and Pharisees is that Jesus ate with sinners and tax-collectors. He ate with them! In the Middle-East, eating with someone means so much more than it does in our culture. To eat with a person in the Middle East is a sacramental act, signifying total acceptance.

Scandal of scandals! "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." It is said out of disgust and anger. Jesus of Nazareth is shaming the reputation of Israel's Law ... and therefore, shaming the reputation of Israel's God.

Jesus responds to these accusations by telling the three parables recorded in Luke 15. They are often called the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. That is too bad, because the subject of the story is not who or what is lost, but whose is lost. The emphasis is not on the lost sheep, but on the shepherd; not on the lost coin, but on the woman; not on the lost sons, but on the father.

And here is the most important fact to remember. Through these parables, Jesus is painting a portrait, a portrait of the Holy God whose reputation the scribes and Pharisees are so zealous to protect. Here, the Incarnate God, the One who can say "they who have seen me have seen the Father" paints a picture of the Father. Here the One who knows the Father, who comes from and abides in the Father, draws us into the Father's heart.

This is why these parables have so powerfully transformed human lives in any cultural setting. In the feelings of the shepherd for his sheep, and his actions toward the sheep; in the feelings of the woman for her coins, and her actions toward the coins, and in the feelings of the father for his sons, and his action toward his sons, we discover who the Father is and what the Father is like. This is so important to grasp: the subject of these stories is the Holy One whose reputation the scribes and Pharisees want to protect.

It turns out that through these parables Jesus makes it worse for himself! For these stories heighten the scandal! Let me show you. Luke 15, verse 11... “There was a man who had two sons.” Two sons. This tells us that we will miss the message of the story if we focus on only one son. The fact is, the parable is told for the benefit of the second son. Both sons, it turns out, leave their father: the younger by travelling to “the far country,” the older while staying at home.

The younger one says to his father (vs. 12), “Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.” What a cruel thing to say! It is as though the boy had said, “father, let’s just pretend you are dead, so I can have what will come to me when you do die.”

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian Theologian and Missionary, spent most of his life studying and teaching Scripture in the Middle-East, mostly in Lebanon and Syria. In his book *The Cross and the Prodigal*, he points out that such a request is unheard of in that culture ... indeed, it is unimaginable. Dr. Bailey says he tested this in endless villages throughout the Middle-East. He asked, “Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?” The answer is always “No.” He then asked, “If anyone did make such a request, what would happen?” The answer is always, “His father would beat him, of course! Why? Because “the request means he wants his father to die!” (p. 31).

In asking the question, the boy is shaming his father. What a self-centered, demanding, rebellious, ungrateful son. “Father give me...” Give me – that is the key-note of his conversation. “... give me my share of your estate.” Here we learn the basic nature of sin. Sin is not breaking the rules (although that is involved), it is breaking a relationship. At the beginning of the story, the younger son has not broken any rules, but he has broken his father’s heart (Bailey, p. 31). As we will see next Sunday, the older son keeps the rules, but also breaks the father’s heart – at an even deeper level.

How does this father respond to the younger son’s cruel request? In a surprising way. As the Middle-Eastern villagers told Kenneth Bailey, the father is expected to beat the son. But what does the father portrayed by Jesus do? Surprise! He grants the request. “He divided his wealth between them” (v. 12), says Jesus. The father gives the son 1/3 of the family wealth! 1/3! And he lets the son go. This tells us something about the love of God. It is not possessive. Love gives the freedom to refuse to be loved. There are times when God lets us have our own way.

There is another surprise in the father’s response. At this point in the story the Middle Easterner expects the father to at least say something like, “OK, go... but you are no longer my son.” But this father does not say that. And in so doing, he is choosing to suffer even more deeply. He is opening himself up to even greater pain. Remember, Jesus is painting a portrait of the Living God, whose reputation the professionals were zealous to protect.

The younger son then gathers together all he has to set off to the far country. The word translated “gather together” (v. 13), could be rendered “turned into cash.” He liquidates his assets so he can travel lightly. He goes from house to house, shop to shop, selling the father’s stock in Bethlehem Steel, Arabian Oil, Dead Sea Fish & Chips, and Jerusalem.com.

Notice that the son does this quickly – “not many days later” (v. 13). The reason for the haste is not simply to get on with the journey. Rather, as Kenneth Bailey suggests, “as he goes from one prospective buyer to another, the intensity of the community hatred and disgust mounts. At every turn he is greeted with amazement, horror, and rejection” (*Poet and Peasant*, 169). He needs to leave town quickly for his own safety! This part of the cultural setting comes into play at a crucial point later in the story.

The son leaves, goes to the far country, far from his own people, and squanders his wealth in “loose living,” or “expensive living.” That is a Biblical euphemism for “wine, women, and song.” He lives “high on the hog,” although I suppose a Jewish boy would not choose to use those exact words. The son lives so loosely that he loses everything – the whole 1/3 of the family’s wealth.

Then a famine hits. Thank God that it does not go well in the far country. Thank God that when he lets us have our own way it does not go well! When the son had lots of money to throw around, he had lots of “friends.” Now that the money is gone, so are the friends. He began to be in need.

Why not go home? He does eventually decide to go ... but why not go home at this point? Because he is afraid to go home. Why afraid? For one thing, he will have to face the taunting and jesting of the villagers when he comes through the village gates. “Ha, ha, ha – so you went off to enjoy life! Look at you, hungry, and dirty ... what a total failure!” He cannot, at this point, contemplate enduring such shame.

I was talking with a Filipino who had moved to Manila from one of the Provinces. He came to the city hoping to find a better job and therefore a better life. What he found was the opposite. He lived in much worse condition than at home. “Why not go home?” I asked. He did not answer. His friend later pulled me aside and said, “he feels he has lost face with his family and the villagers. ... life in Manila is easier to bear than the shame he expects to feel at home!”

Furthermore, the younger son does not want to encounter the hostility and anger of the elders of the village. They might beat him. They might make things so miserable he would starve in the village.

Furthermore, he does not choose to go home at this point because he fears the scorn of the older brother. The older brother might say, “You lousy, good-for-nothing-bum! You wasted 1/3 of the family wealth. You have no right to be here!” I’m the oldest of five sons, and I can imagine giving that speech! Or, the elder brother might have some mercy and say, “you blew it ... now get it back. When you have recovered it all then come home!” I often wonder how many younger siblings are kept from the father’s house by such older siblings? Scribes and Pharisees, if they let you in at all, demand that you first measure up. The younger brother will endure the famine before feeling such scorn from his brother.

One other thing explains why the son does not at this point choose to go home. It is the father. He is afraid of the father. He fully expects the anger, scorn, punishment and rejection of the father. The father has every right to so feel and act. He has every right to forget the son. He has every right to say, “you made your bed – now sleep in it!”

So the son chooses to stay in the far country. He goes to one of the citizens of that far country – a gentile (v. 15). He begs for work. Here is an interesting point to note. The word translated “he hired himself” (v. 15) literally means, “he glued himself.” The picture is one of sheer desperation. He was forcing himself on that citizen – “I will do anything!” It is very likely that the citizen does not want to help the son and tries to get rid of him by offering him a job a Jewish boy will surely refuse (Bailey, *Cross and Prodigal*, 44). “Sure, kid... feed the pigs.” Pigs were the village garbage collectors. Yet the son would rather accept that job than go home.

The situation continues to worsen. He would gladly have eaten whatever the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything – not even pig-food – to eat.

Then, Jesus says, the son comes to his senses. He says, “How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am starving to death!” (v. 17). What made him come to his senses? His need? Partly.

Dale Bruner, who taught at Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines, helped me see a deeper reason. What brought the son to his senses was “the memory of the father.” He remembers the goodness of the father. “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare...” He remembers the father treated his servants and employees generously. What a reputation! Oh that my kids would have such a memory of me!

So the younger son reasons to himself: “What am I doing here? I will get up, go home, and ask to become a hired hand. I will face the taunting and scorn and rejection, but at least I will not starve! So off he goes, ragged, weary, needing a bath, with nothing left of his inheritance.

As he walks home, he puts together a speech (v. 18-19). The speech has three parts. I can imagine him practicing it over and over as he walks home. I remember that day when I was seventeen years old and I over-turned my father’s pick-up truck. I and two of my buddies were horsing around on a gravel road, and I flipped that thing. I can still remember that speech!

Part 1: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.” Part 1 is his confession. He knows that what he did is wrong, shameful, sinful.

Part 2: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Part 2 is his affirmation of the consequences of sin. He knows he has shamed the father, the family, and the village. He knows he has broken the relationship. He knows he has no claim to sonship.

Part 3: “Make me like one of your hired men.” Part 3 is his attempt to make up for his sin, his offer to pay off his debt.

Review the speech. Three parts.

Part 1: “Father I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.”

Part 2: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

Part 3: “Make me like one of your hired men.”

He says the words over and over as he makes the long journey home.

And now we come to the heart of the story. Remember why Jesus is telling it. He is justifying and interpreting His behaviour which the scribes and Pharisees considered scandalous. At this point the scribes and Pharisees were listening very carefully.

Jesus says, “But while the son was a long way off...” (v. 20). Yes?

“...his father saw him.” Surprise! Everyone in that day expected the father to have forgotten the son, and to have lost himself in his business. But no, not this father. This father has been longing for the son, looking and waiting for his son. This is why Helmut Thielicke, the great German preacher, entitled his book on the Parables *The Waiting Father*. The waiting father? What a picture of the Holy God!

“... while the son was a long way off his father saw him.” The father has been waiting for him. Do you believe the Father sees you today? Do you believe the Father is watching and waiting for your loved ones, children or grandchildren, some of whom are in the far country. Do you see Him waiting for you?

Jesus continues “... and the father felt compassion for him.” Another surprise! Everyone in that day expected scorn and disgust and indignation. “The kid blew it. He wouldn’t listen. He had to have his own way... well, let him have it!” But no, not this father. This father was filled with compassion. The word Luke uses is related to the word for guts, inward parts – *splangkna*. The father was deeply moved, ripped up in his guts for his sin. What a picture of the Holy God! He is the suffering Father.

Jesus continues. “And the father ran to his son...” (v.20). Another surprise! The father ran. In the Middle-East and in Asia, a man of the father’s age and stature never ran in public anywhere for any reason (Bailey, *Prodigal*, 54). So Soniya Mathew, on our staff is from India, and she wrote me an email during the week because she’s been looking at the parable. Soniya said, she read that part about the father running, and she said “that would never, ever happen in India!” And it would never happen in the Middle-East, because it’s a shameful thing.

To run in public meant having to lift the front hem of his robes, thereby exposing his undergarments – a very shameful act. The father ran! Literally, he raced! The father raced to his son. What a picture of the Living God: the running Father. See Him? See Him running for you? For your children and grandchildren? Running to your neighbours?

Why run? Because he longs to see his son. Yes. And because, and here is where the culture comes in, the father knows what the son will face when he reaches the village gates. The father knows that the son will be heckled and humiliated. The father knows that the son may even be beaten by the elders. So the father runs to head it all off. Shameful act! What a story!

Jesus continues, “and the father embraced him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him” (v. 20). Literally, he kept kissing, again and again. What a scandalous picture Jesus is painting of the Holy God. The father should have remained back in the house. The father should have remained distant at the arrival of the son who squandered 1/3 of the family wealth, who shamed the father’s name, who shamed the name of the family and the village.

But no. Jesus knows a different kind of father. This father had been waiting, longing, suffering. And when he saw his son, he ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him – filthy though he may be!

And get this. By that act... kissing the son in public... the father takes upon himself all the shame of the son. The father transfers the shame to Himself. And now, whatever it was that the villagers, elders, and older son wanted to do to the younger son, they have to do to the father. Oh my!

While stunned by this surprising, scandalous love, the son gives his speech. Remember? It has three parts.

The son begins: “Father I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.” The father lets the son say Part 1. That is redemptive. God lets us clear the air. God hears our confession.

The son continues, Part 2: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (v. 21). The father lets the son say Part 2. It must be said, for it means we realize how damaging sin is. It means we realize that sin breaks relationship.

There is a third part. Remember? What is it? “Make me like one of your hired men.” So the son takes a deep breath, preparing to say the words. But before he can give part 3, the father surprises him again. The father interrupts the son with his own speech. See that in verse 22?

That interruption is the gospel. The father cuts off part 3 – God will not hear it. We can say it, but God will not hear it. It is irrelevant. God will not let us try to make up for our sin. God will not let us try to pay the debt. How could we? What could we possibly give? God will not let us try to earn our way back to the family. Oh, we do it all the time. We get busy doing lots of good deeds. We give ourselves to intense religious ritual. We wallow in guilt, thinking that if we suffer enough God will finally be pleased.

The father interrupts the son before he can give part 3. For there is nothing the son can do ... but come home. That is all God wants. Just come to our senses, turn around, and come home.

As I said, Part 3 of the son’s speech is cut off by the father’s speech. And what the father says is another surprise! Everyone expects something like, “go get a shower, kid... get some decent clothes on.” But not this father! “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him” (v. 22). The best robe? The best robes is the father’s robe! Surprise! The prodigal son is to enter the village and attend a party wearing the father’s robe.

What a picture of the Holy God. The father dresses the prodigal son. The Holy God clothes us unholy sinners with His own holiness. He covers my rags with His robe! Oh, “I love to tell the story! ‘Twill be my theme in glory!”

There is more... another surprise. “Quick! Put a ring on his finger.” The ring is the so-called signet ring, the ring with which the father sealed all his official documents. My goodness! The son who squandered 1/3 of the family wealth is given authority to manage what remains of the family business and fortune! Sinners? Leaders in the kingdom of God? Tax-collectors? Managers of the household of God?

There is more... another surprise. “Quick! Put sandals on his feet!” Slaves went barefoot. Sons and daughters wore shoes.

There is more... another surprise. “Quick! Bring the fattened calf and kill it.” Oh my! The fattened calf was reserved for special guests. “The highest honour that can be shown to any guest (in that day) is to butcher a calf” (Bailey, *Prodigal*, 60). Sinners and tax-collectors? Worth butchering the fattened calf? Honoured guests at the meal of the Holy One?

There is more! Yet another surprise. “Quick! Let us have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.” Jesus reveals the Rejoicing Father. The feast-making God, who loves to party when his children come home.

Everything the father does in this parable is unexpected and culturally scandalous. Everything. Just as Jesus' treatment of sinners and tax-collectors is unexpected and religiously scandalous. Jesus defends His scandalous actions by the even more scandalous claim that in Him the Holy One, God the Father, is welcoming sinners and eating with them. In Jesus, the Holy One embraces sinners. It is the embrace that makes us holy! Do you believe that? "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound ..." The grace of the One Who only acts in ways that honors His name! (Ezekiel 36:23).

Here is the gospel, the good news every person on this planet is longing to hear. In the Incarnation, the Living and Holy God lifts the hem of his robe, and runs toward lost sons and daughters. On the cross, the Living and Holy God takes upon Himself all the shame of all the unholy ... and rejoices as He does it! So what if some religious folk think that God thereby tarnishes His reputation. All that matters is that lost daughters and sons have come home.

Besides, Jesus is not tarnishing God's reputation. Jesus is honouring God's reputation as no one ever has. For this is the Name the Holy God has chosen to have in the world: "This Man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Brothers and sisters: it is safe to come home. It matters not what you have done or not done. It matters not what you have done or not done since the last time you heard the story. Just come home. Just turn around, and come home. Oh sure, some older brothers and sisters might hassle us, demanding that we measure up first. But that is because they do not know what Jesus knows about the Father. And besides, the only opinion that matters is the Father's. And the only begotten Son of the Father, Jesus the Son of God, is telling us that it is safe to come home. He ought to know! He is the One Who, from all eternity, lives in and comes from the Father's heart.

Why do you think the Son of God dies in the posture He does? Arms outstretched? Because that is the posture of His Father's heart! The outstretched arms of the Son are the outstretched arms of the Father. I tell you ... it is safe to come home. You will be welcomed by the Father with scandalous love.