

# Luke 15:1-2 & 11-32

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well do turn with me back in your Bibles to Luke chapter 15, that's on page 874 of the Church Bibles. Now the parable we're looking at today, as many of you know, is the third in a trilogy of stories that Jesus tells on the same occasion.

There's the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the lost son, or the prodigal son as it's become known in our Bibles. And these parables told in the same situation are really carefully tailored by Jesus to speak to a very specific challenge, a challenge that's posed to him in verses 1 and 2.

So it's helpful for us to start today just by looking at the context of these parables. Verse 1, Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

By this stage in Jesus' career, the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious authorities today, are really viewing Jesus as a threat to them. He's a threat to their political authority, and he's a threat to their religious authority, isn't he?

He's been performing miracles and healings all around the area. He's been teaching to great crowds, and a movement's developing behind him.

[ 1 : 21 ] A movement's developing behind him, and not them. He's a threat to them. And really, they'd like any chance they'd have to discredit him. It looks a lot like the kind of negative politics that we're getting a little bit tired of seeing on TV, isn't it?

They just want some kind of scandal, something to say, look at this guy, are you really listening to him? They're looking out for him to slip up, and they think they've caught him, don't they?

They think they've caught him. This man receives sinners and eats with him. This man receives sinners, or you can also put it, this man welcomes sinners.

What kind of rabbi is this? What kind of holy man? What kind of teacher lets these kind of people meet with him? You can imagine them already planning how they're going to use the dirt that they've just dug up.

They've got the banners they're going to hold up at the back of the next meeting, haven't they? This man welcomes sinners, a big arrow towards Jesus. You can imagine them canvassing the crowds as they come in to the hall.

[ 2 : 25 ] Do you know about the guy you're about to hear? Do you know about him? He welcomes sinners. You can imagine them rubbing their hands with glee. They've got the trump card for every theological argument they're ever going to have.

Yeah, okay, Jesus says that, but did you see who we had dinner with last night? This man welcomes sinners, you can't listen to him. So you just wonder, as you're reading these first few verses, how is Jesus going to respond to this?

How would our politicians today respond to it? Well, I guess there's some options, aren't there? Well, I didn't really know who these people were when they came to me. Oh, they're tax collectors, they're sinners, they're bad people, sorry.

I mean, they came to me, I didn't know. Or perhaps he might say, well, look, it's not my fault, is it? They drew near to me, I didn't ask them to come. It's not my fault if people come towards me.

Or maybe he might try and downplay the situation. Well, yeah, okay, they're not as good as you guys, Pharisees, but they're not that bad. They're not really that bad.

[ 3 : 28 ] There are a lot of options, aren't there, for Jesus to duck the issue, to kind of skirt around the situation. But in the three parables that he tells, he does nothing like that. He takes the issue to place on, doesn't he?

You think I welcome sinners? You don't know how right you are. He takes their scandal and he makes it a slogan. I welcome sinners.

I'm afraid if you're hoping for anything more complicated than that today, you've pretty much heard it. But we're going to be working through that this morning. The third of the stories which Jesus tells really works this through in great detail.

It shows us how far he would go to welcome sinners. It's really, in a way, a kind of a verbal cartoon, if you will. Children are probably delighted to find out there are cartoons in the Bible.

It's a verbal cartoon and it has three scenes, three pictures. Firstly, Jesus shows us scandalous sin. He shows us scandalous sin. Then he shows us a scandalous welcome.

[ 4 : 28 ] And finally, just to really confound the Pharisees, he turns the picture around on them and shows them scandalous obedience. Scandalous sin, scandalous welcome, and scandalous obedience.

But if you hear one thing today, just remember, Jesus welcomes sinners. So, the first picture we get from Jesus here, the first scene in his story, is from verse 11, isn't it?

There was a man who had two sons. It starts, and it's a very familiar story, isn't it? A man has two sons, and the second of his sons has itchy feet. He doesn't want to stay at home.

He doesn't want to live with his father. However, he wants to go off and explore and make his way in the world himself. So, he demands his share of the estate now. He asks his dad to cash up whatever savings he's got set aside for him, and to give them to him now, so he can go out into the world.

But he doesn't invest that money wisely, does he? He hasn't taken this money from dad so he can start up a new business on his own. No. Verse 13 we read, don't we? Not many days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

[ 5 : 48 ] He gathers up his money, and he squanders it. The words are literally, he gathers it up, and he scatters it. It's a complete waste. He takes all his dad's hard-earned money, and he spends it in the way that probably only young men know how, in this far country.

And the money dries up, and there's a famine. And he's alone in this far country, isn't he? Far away from his family, far away from anyone he knows, he's alone, and he's desperate.

And he ends up with nowhere to turn, but to hire himself out as a pig herd. Verses 15 and 16. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. And no one gave him anything. Jesus knows his audience here, doesn't he? He's deliberately painting a picture for the Pharisees, of the most disgusting, the most unpleasant, the most objectionable character imaginable.

This man in the eyes of the Pharisees would be the lowest possible person, wouldn't he? He's rejected his family, he's left them, and squandered all his money.

[ 7 : 03 ] He's sold himself into the service of a Gentile, a non-Jew, and now he's living with pigs. Not only is he living with pigs, but he's made himself low in the pigs, hasn't he?

He's longing for their food. You can imagine, we call it the parable of the prodigal son, well, therefore we're hearing this as the parable of pig, boy. That's probably all they've heard by this point.

This is pig boy here. He's the lowest of the low. Deuteronomy 14, verse 8, The pig is unclean for you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch.

Well, here's the son in that far old country, and he's longing for the food of the pigs, isn't he? He's as low as it gets for the Pharisees. That's probably where their attention would be, isn't it?

Our attention in our tradition has normally been one stage further up that scale of his decline, hasn't it? We call it the parable of the prodigal son. Now, I had to Google that word. It's not a word I've ever used outside this context.

[ 8 : 02 ] Prodigal, a prodigal is someone who spends money wastefully, isn't it? Someone who spends money wastefully. So, the Pharisees focus on the pig connection.

We, historically, have tended to focus on how wasteful this boy is. But the real offense is earlier on in the story, isn't it? Actually, the real offense is not his profession, it's not the fact he's a pig herd, and it's not his spending habits.

These are symptoms of the boy's problem. The real offense that this boy commits is earlier on, right in verse 12, it's his attitude towards his father. Hear the cold words of verse 12 again.

Father, give me the share of property that's coming to me. Father, give me the share of property that's coming to me. He's asking for his inheritance, isn't he? And there's something really distasteful about it, isn't it?

It's generally distasteful to think about inheriting something from someone who's still alive, isn't it? It's a distasteful idea. Catherine had a friend at university who was a wealthy only son.

[ 9 : 09 ] And he was a very prudent boy. And he liked to go to seminars on inheritance tax planning. And he would take notes, and he would feed these back to his parents.

Now you might say, and in that context, I didn't know the boy, it may have been prudent financial planning. But there's something distasteful about it, isn't there? There's something distasteful about imagining the inheritance before they're even gone.

But this son takes it a step further. He doesn't just imagine it. He reaches out to take it, and he asks for it now. Dad, you know that money that I'm going to have when you're gone? Well, actually, I quite like it now.

You know that field, that field where you grew up, where you grew up, where you've always loved living, and you've grown your crops there for years? Well, I know I'm going to have that when you die, so why don't you just give it to me now?

It's incredible, isn't it? It's outrageous and offensive. I wish you were dead already, frankly, so that I could inherit from you. I don't want you. I just want your stuff.

[ 10 : 13 ] It's exaggerated, and it's extreme and outrageous. I don't want you. I just want your stuff. But this story isn't really about honouring our inheritance, is it?

It's not a story that Jesus tells to teach us that we need to honour our parents, so perhaps a valid application. When it comes down to it, it's actually a picture of our relationship with God, isn't it?

That's why Jesus tells this story. And when it comes down to it, our sin against God is actually exactly the same, really. I don't want you. I want your stuff.

That's the attitude we show towards God. I don't want you. I want your stuff. The real scandal of sin is not ceremonial uncleanness, as the Pharisees have it, or outward appearances.

It's the attitude that we have towards God. We don't want him. We want his stuff. That was the problem in the Garden of Eden, wasn't it? God made Adam and Eve. He made them, and he puts them in a beautiful garden.

[ 11 : 16 ] And he fills it with all the kind of food they could possibly want. He makes them rulers over the whole animal kingdom. They have everything good. And God walks with them in the garden. That's an incredible statement, isn't it?

God walked with them in the garden. But they wanted just that one fruit they weren't allowed, didn't they? Just wanted that one fruit they couldn't have. And when they reached out and took that fruit, well, they said to God, well, I don't really want you.

I just want your stuff. Actually, I'd rather take your blessings and ignore you. The trade-off seems ludicrous when we see it in the garden, doesn't it? It seems ludicrous.

They had the opportunity to walk with God. To walk with God. But they choose an apple instead. It's a ludicrous trade. We know, don't we, but it's a trade that we make every day.

It's a trade that we make when we try to enjoy God's world while ignoring him. It's a trade we make when we try to enjoy all the gifts that God's given us without submitting to his righteous rules.

[ 12 : 24 ] The catechism teaches us, doesn't it, that man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Well, our sin is subtle. Our sin is subtle and we just try and shortcut that a little bit.

We decide that our chief end is to enjoy God's blessings and to glorify them forever. Not to glorify God and not to enjoy God but to glorify his blessings and to enjoy them.

And when we try to seize those blessings of God, when we try to seize those blessings while ignoring him, we're really just showing the same attitude that the Sullyman story shows, aren't we?

That same scandalous attitude to God. I don't want you. I just want your stuff. See, Jesus knows the scandal of sin, doesn't he?

And he lays it there for us here. It's that attitude that says, look God, I don't want you. I just want your stuff. So in the first picture, Jesus doesn't talk to you as he does.

[ 13 : 23 ] He clearly knows how sinful sin is. But he moves on in the second picture to show that in spite of sin and the scandal of sin, there's a scandal of welcome on offer.

The son comes to his senses in verses 17 and 18. But when he came to himself, he says, how many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger.

He works out that even his dad's servants, even his dad's slaves, do better in life than he does. He's got no right to expect anything from his dad, but maybe, just maybe, he'll take him back as a servant and he'll at least have bread again.

So he comes back from the far country and you can imagine him as he walks back that long distance. He'll be tired and hungry. He'll be filthy from the pigsty. People will be seeing him and they'll be walking on the other side of the street, won't they?

They won't want to look at him. But the father sees him from a distance and what's he going to do? What's he going to do when he sees him? This foyer has caused him so much offence.

[ 14 : 29 ] Is he going to go inside and knock the door? Is he going to bolt up? Is he going to wait there sternly at the gate? Wait there sternly, holding the moral high ground.

You come to me. And then I'll think, well, how am I going to deal with you? No, that's not what we see in verse 20, is it? And he arose and came to his father but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

There's no thought here of how this is going to look to outsiders, is it? The father doesn't stop and think, well, the neighbours are going to talk about this. He's not too proud to go out and meet his son, is he?

Or keen to stand on that moral high ground, well, he's caused me effects, he'd better come to me. He doesn't feel anger but he feels compassion for the son that comes back, doesn't he?

He runs to embrace his son. He embraces him, literally, it's as he drapes himself on his son's neck. You can imagine the boy saying, Dad, Dad, you don't know where I've been, you can't touch me.

[ 15 : 36 ] But he doesn't wait for that kind of explanation, does he? He kisses him. He embraces him and he kisses him. If they were scandalized by the boy's sin, you can imagine the Pharisee's going to be equally scandalized by the father's welcome here.

The boy's sin was scandalous. You can't just welcome him back like that. You can't even touch him. This is pig boy after all. But we see Jesus' intention pretty clearly here, don't we?

He's shown us a picture of the worst kind of sinner. He's shown us a picture of someone so detestable that they couldn't even be allowed in the life society. And now he said, well, imagine the worst kind of sinner, imagine the warmest possible welcome.

That's what it means when I say I welcome sinners. Imagine the worst kind of sinner and the warmest possible welcome. Well, that's exactly what I'm about, Jesus says. That's exactly what I'm here for.

Sometimes we can find ourselves so ashamed of perhaps what we've done, what we see ourselves to have done, that we can't imagine that anyone would not have anything to do with this, can't we?

[ 16 : 48 ] We perhaps think about things we've said or thought, that maybe no one knows, things we've done, and we look around ourselves, maybe on the bus, maybe in church, maybe at work, and we just think, if they knew what I'd done, if they knew what I said, if they knew who I really was, the kind of person I am, don't you want anything to do with me?

And if we think that of people, well, we think that even more of God, don't we? If he really knows who I am, the kind of offense I've caused him, can you want anything to do with me? Well, the story says he does, doesn't it?

That's what the story shows. Imagine the worst kind of sinner, the worst person you can imagine, worse even than yourself, and imagine the warmest kind of welcome. That's what Jesus offers him. That's what he says he gives. The image of the father running to the lost son is a picture of what Jesus offers to us. It's a small picture, isn't it, as he runs with compassion, a small picture of what Jesus has done for us on a cosmic scale.

Remember those words that Paul spoke earlier. Jesus, though he was God, though he was with God in the beginning, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[ 18 : 20 ] Jesus, just like that father, was moved by compassion to leave his throne in heaven so that he could welcome people like us.

Not considering his dignity, not considering who he was in comparison to us, Jesus' incarnation is part of that scandalous welcome, isn't it?

a welcome that would have been scandalous to the Pharisees, perhaps more scandalous than sin itself, God entering our world to meet with us.

That's exactly what Jesus means, doesn't it? It's exactly what Jesus means in this passage. It's exactly what he means when he says he welcomed sins. And do you notice that the welcome doesn't stop there?

It doesn't stop at the embrace. Jesus' story carries on, doesn't it? The son starts to speak, he's got that story rehearsed. Father, I've sinned against you, just, I know I don't deserve a place at your table anymore, I'm not your son anymore, just treat me like a servant.

[ 19 : 28 ] The son starts to speak, but his father won't have any of it, he's not interested. Before he's even got there, we read, don't we, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put it on a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate.

He puts him in the best robes and he throws him a feast. Why? Verse 24. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

When Jesus welcomes back, he doesn't just welcome us as servants, does he? He's not just welcoming us back as people who can now serve him. He welcomes us back as family.

He invites us to feast with him. Do you remember the original accusation of the scribes and the Pharisees? This man receives sinners and eats with them. Well, that's exactly our God, isn't it? That's exactly the Jesus of the Bible. This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. It's one of the things that we remember when we share the Lord's Supper, isn't it? When we share the Lord's Supper and the bread and the wine is handed out.

[ 20 : 35 ] Well, isn't that Jesus coming to eat with us? To eat with us as his family accepted in him. And it's a sign and a foretaste of what we're one day going to enjoy in the new creation, that marriage supper of the Lamb, when we feast with him in heaven.

Jesus doesn't just welcome sinners, but he chooses to eat with them as family. We have a scandalous sin to come to terms with, but we also have a scandalous welcome.

Thirdly, the third scene in this story, the lens focuses again, doesn't it? We've had the younger son, we've had the father, and now the scene shifts to the older son.

And like the Pharisees, he's not impressed by his father's behavior. He's not impressed at all. Verse 25, now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he received him back safe and sound.

[ 21 : 47 ] But he was angry and refused to go in. It feels a bit like his older son's got a point, doesn't it, when we hear him in this verse.

Well, he's been working in the fields all these years. He's been an obedient son. He's done everything a son would be expected to do, while his father, while his brother has wasted everything. He's gone away, disrespected his father, brought shame on the family, wasted money. And which one of the ones get in the party? You can imagine the Pharisees nodding along, remembering the proverbs they heard as a child, whoever works for land has plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

And everything says here that the older brother should be the one who's getting the party, not the younger one, not this fool who's wasted his money and had to come back in such a pitiful state. But the words in verse 29 give away, they give away what this older brother is thinking, what his real problem is.

[ 22 : 54 ] Speaking to his father, he says, look, these many years I've served you and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

His problem isn't that he's still angry with his brother's disrespect. It isn't that he feels like some kind of shame's been brought in the family. He's not jealous of his father's attention at all, is he?

He's jealous of his father's stuff. You never gave me a goat. On the surface of it, the older brother and the younger brother couldn't be more different, could they?

The one is obedient and diligent and respectable. The other is this kind of happy-go-lucky waster who really couldn't be any good for family at all.

They couldn't be any more different on the face of it, but their hearts are exactly the same. Their hearts are exactly the same. Despite their experiences, they don't either of them love their father particularly.

[ 23 : 56 ] They just want his stuff. They just want his stuff. The two brothers want exactly the same thing. The difference is just how they go about getting it.

One of them is pretty honest. Dad, I quite like your inheritance. I'm going to take it and spend it. The other one is more scheming, isn't it? Dad, I'd like your inheritance, so I'm going to work for it. But they're exactly the same. Exactly the same at home. In the book of Job, God holds Job out as an example of righteous obedience, doesn't he?

God holds Job out as an example of righteous obedience, and Satan comes to God and says, does Job fear God for no reason? Job, well, Job only loves you because you've given him so much. Does Job fear God for no reason? He only loves you for your stuff. Take away your blessings, Satan says, and he will curse you to your face. Take away your blessings and he will curse you to your face.

[ 25 : 00 ] Well, Job passes the test in the book of Job, doesn't he? But that older brother fails him. He fails him over a roast dinner. The challenge that we have here for the Pharisees, and perhaps for many of us as well, is that being respectable in the eyes of the church and in the eyes of the world doesn't mean that we have the right attitude towards God, does it?

It doesn't mean that we have the right attitude to God. You can see how Jesus is framing this now. Imagine the worst kind of sinner. Well, your heart's just the same.

Think about those tax collectors that the Pharisees and scribes. Your hearts are just the same. If our obedience is just another way to get at God's blessings, to seize on his gifts for ourselves while still really ignoring him, if our obedience isn't an expression of love, but we see it as a kind of service to try and earn his blessing, then it's just as much sin as the prodigal son's wasteful disrespect, isn't it?

The two brothers couldn't be more different on the surface, but they have the same sinful hearts. But what's fantastic about this parable is that they may have the same hearts, they also have the same father, don't they?

Can you imagine how the father might respond to this son? He's been longing for his younger son to come home. Longing for it. He's always wanted to see his younger son back.

[ 26 : 36 ] The son's come back, he's throwing a party, and the older brother, rather than joining in, he's throwing a strop outside. He's having a tantrum. You can imagine how this father could come out and speak to his son.

He could speak in anger, couldn't he? You can imagine the things that could be done. He could rebuke him, reprove him. But what word, what word does Jesus use here? Well, verse 28, the older son was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and entreated him. He shows him the same compassion, doesn't he, that he showed the younger son. He comes out with gentleness, with pleading and entreating.

Look, you've got everything, my son. You are always with me, and all that I have is mine. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this, your brother was dead, and is alive.

He was lost and is found. He knows what's going on in the older brother's heart, and he comes out to plead with him, to reason with him. Jesus' message to the Pharisees isn't, I've come for the sinners, so you've got no interest here.

[ 27 : 50 ] It's, I've come for the sinners. I've come for the worst kind of sinners, and that includes you. Jesus welcomes sinners, whether they look like they're in open rebellion like the younger son, or whether they're respectively trying to coerce God's blessings, like the older one.

So very simply this morning, I hope we've seen from this parable that Jesus has really one message to whoever we are, and that is that the Pharisees have got it spot on right.

He welcomes sinners, he welcomes sinners, and he delights to eat with them. So whether your own sin is really quite like the younger sons, that open rebellion, going off into the far-off country, ignoring God openly, or whether it's that more respectable kind, where we attend church not so much for the love of God, but for the desire to coerce his blessing from him.

But whether I suspect the men in this is somewhere in between, the message is the same, isn't it?

The message is the same. I welcome sinners. That's what Jesus says.

I welcome sinners. And I eat with them. Amen.