

The Prodigal Sons: *A Gospel View*

Scripture: *Luke 15:1-2 & 11-32.*

Summary of Sermon: In this passage Christ explains the gospel, our need for the gospel, and how we personalize the gospel in our lives.

Introduction

Christ Jesus came into the world to make the gospel experiential in our lives. This explains why, throughout His earthly ministry, Christ preached and taught the gospel with such single-minded devotion, and taught His disciples to do the same. This is also why all the miracles that Christ performed, and all the parables and stories that Christ told, pointed to the urgency of the gospel, our need for the gospel, and how we can personalize the gospel in our lives.

Of all the stories that Christ told that are recorded in the Gospels, perhaps none is as powerful, as clear, and as instructive of the gospel as the story He told in **Luke 15** about two lost sons. Many Bible readers think of this story as the story of one lost son, but it is really a story about two lost sons, as we will see shortly.

In this story in **Luke 15**, first, Christ shows us that the reason we all need the gospel is because of the hopelessness of our **sin**. Second, He reminds us of the amazing, and even scandalous love of God our **Savior**, that is displayed in the gospel. And third, He teaches us the only way we can receive the **salvation** of God that He offers to us through the gospel.

So, from these **3S's** in this story that Christ told in **Luke 15:1-2 and 11-32**, He helps us to understand the gospel, He shows us why we all need the gospel, and he explains how we can personalize the gospel in our lives. *Read Passage.*

I. Our Sin (Verses 1-13)

- 1) In **verses 12 and 13**, we read that the younger of the two sons came to his father and demanded his share of the father's estate, and that after he got this, this younger son then set off for a distant country where he squandered his wealth in wild living.
- 2) In **verses 28 and 29**, we read that when the older son returns home to find that the younger son had returned home and the father had thrown a party for him, he was so furious that he refused to participate in the party.

He rejects his father's invitation to participate in the party, and insults the father by refusing to even address him as father. He says to his father disrespectfully, "Look here, you . . ."

So, as you can see, both sons are estranged from their father. One is estranged from the father by his self-centered rebellion, and one is estranged from the father by his self-centered arrogance.

- 3) Christ shows us that both sons have missed the mark of a good relationship of obedience and respect for their father. What Christ has done here, in essence, is to take us back to the very beginning of the Bible story.

The first two chapters of the Bible show us that God created human beings to be in a dependent, trusting, and loving relationship with Him in which we take up our God-given roles as stewards of God's earth. God created us, in other words, to be His people, living in His world under His rule and therefore enjoying His blessing of peace with Him, peace with nature, and peace with one another.

Our first parents exemplified this reality. In the first two chapters of Genesis Adam and Eve were God's people in God's place in the Garden of Eden, living under God's rule and enjoying His blessing; they lived in a beautiful garden, with a perfect climate, they had organic natural food in abundance, they had peace with God, peace with nature, and peace with each other.

- 4) **Gen. 3:1-13** narrates how this original plan and purpose of God for us and for all His creation were disrupted when our first parents, with all of us inside them, chose to obey the voice of Satan instead of the voice of God. This resulted in what Bible scholars call *the Fall*, meaning our fall away from God's original plan and purpose for His creation.

By their disobedience, our first parents, with all of us inside them, *missed the mark* of God's original intentions for us to be His people, living in His world under His rule, and enjoying His blessing of peace and well-being.

In the OT the Hebrew word that expresses *missing the mark* of God's purposes is *Hata*. In the NT the Greek word for this is *Hamartano*. In our English Bibles both words are translated as *sin*.

- 5) The origin of sin, therefore, was the original disobedience of our first parents in the Garden. Paul described this in **Rom. 5:19** by writing: *By one man's disobedience, the many became sinners*. Isaiah describes it this way in **Isaiah 53:6**: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way*. Like the two sons in this story.
- 6) We all, in the first Adam, became *sin-ful*, meaning that our basic human nature became a distorted one that naturally misses the mark of God's standards, God's love, God's goodness, God's purposes, God's holiness and God's righteousness.
- 7) So, we can summarize **our first S** from by saying that, like these two sons in this story who had missed the mark of their father's good plans and purposes for them, we all come into this world, lost in our **sin**, and estranged from God.

II. Our Saviour (Verses 1-10)

- 1) In this story, we see that the father is a good, kind, patient, benevolent, and a very loving parent.

The original hearers of this story would have been shocked to hear of Christ's depiction of this father.

This is because a wealthy father in that culture at that time would have rightly responded angrily with verbal and physical blows to the attitudes and behavior of both sons.

Both sons, you see, rejected their father's love. They showed that they were more interested in what they could get from him, than in himself, as their loving father.

The younger son's request to the father in **verses 12 and 13** that the father should give him his share of the father's property showed that he wanted him dead, because in that culture, at that time, a child only got a share of the father's property when the father had died.

The older son's statement in **verse 29** that the father had never given him anything for all his years of hard work shows us that he too was more interested in what he could get from the father, than in the father himself.

- 2) This was exactly the same with our first parents in the Garden. They missed the love of God that was everywhere on display around them. This is why, in **Hosea 6:7**, God described the break in His relationship with our first parents, when they disobeyed and rebelled against Him, by declaring that Adam refused His love.

By going away from home, the younger son rejected the father's love. By refusing to join the party for the returned younger son, the older son also rejected his father's love.

- 3) And yet look at the father's patient and persistent love for these two lost sons. When **verse 2** tells us that the father divided his property between them, what it means is that the father sold off a third of his land and he gave that money to the son.

In that culture, at that time, your life and social identity was bound up in how much land you owned. In other words, the father displayed his love for his errant son by giving up a part of his life for this lost and rebellious son.

In **verse 20**, we read that, when the younger son decided to return home, while this younger son was still a long way off, his father saw him, and he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Obviously, the father had looked out yearningly every day, day and evening, to see if the son would ever return home.

In that culture, at that time, wealthy, respected patriarchs like this father were expected to walk in a slow, dignified fashion. So, this father had probably not run anywhere for any reason for 40 years.

And yet, here in this story, Christ tells us that this father run down the road like a teenager to welcome his home-coming son. The father had thrown all social norms and etiquette to the wind, and picked up his robes, and he had run like a young person. Think of what a powerful expression of love that is!

So, here he is, a father who leaves the comfort and security of his home and exposes himself in a humiliating fashion in the village street. This is a picture of God's love for us displayed in the incarnation of Christ, and His humiliating and painful death on the cross for us.

- 4) What was essential for the younger son's reconciliation with his father, and for our reconciliation as well with God our Father, was a physical demonstration of self-emptying love in suffering such as the father displays in this story, and such as God in Christ displayed on the cross for us.

In **verse 31**, although the older son had disrespected him by addressing him arrogantly refusing to come into the house, the father responds not with anger, but with these words: "My son . . ." If that is not love, I don't know what love is.

- 5) The father in this story does not respond like a father to these two lost sons. He responds like a mother. The NT consistently explains that the defining motivation in God's efforts to save us from our sin is His motherly, unconditional love for us.
- 6) For example, in **John 3:16**, Christ Himself confirms this in those well-known words that define the gospel so well. **Rom. 5:7-8** echoes this same gospel truth by declaring that very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrates His own love for us by the fact that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
- 7) So, we can summarize **our second S** by saying that, like the father in this story, the defining motivation of God that makes Him our **Saviour** who saves us from our sin through the gospel, is His amazing, and even scandalous love, for us.

III. Our Salvation (Verse 15, 20-21)

- 1) **Verses 14 to 20** tell us that, out there in the far country, far away from home, having squandered his wealth, becoming poverty-stricken and increasingly desperate, the younger son came to his senses, and he set out to return to his father. The NT refers to this action on the part of the younger son, *repentance*.
- 2) In the NT, the Greek word that is translated into English as *repentance* refers to not just a response of remorse over sin, but to a turning of our hearts, our minds and our wills, to God in a way that results in a permanent change in our behaviour, like this younger son in this story.

This younger son did not just feel remorse over his bad decision, and his terrible condition. He changed his behaviour by getting up, and making his way back to his father. This is NT repentance. If, in his remorse, he had stayed where he was after coming to his senses, he would not have received the father's forgiveness and reconciliation. That would not have been repentance.

What Christ is teaching us here is that the first step we need to take to receive God's salvation is repentance. Christ is teaching us here that our first indispensable response in our return to God has to be repentance.

This is why at the beginning of His public ministry the first words that Jesus Christ spoke in **Matt. 3:17**, were, *Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near*. These were also the first words John the Baptist spoke when he began his ministry. This was also true in the ministry of the Apostles.

- 3) In **verses 18 and 19**, we read that, after he came to his senses, and decided to return home, the younger son wrote out a little speech that he planned to read to his father about how he would like to work hard to repay his father.

But in **verses 21 and 22**, we see that when the younger son returned to his father, and he began to read his little good works speech, the father stopped him dead in the middle of his speech.

What the Lord is teaching us here is that our good works can never be the basis of our acceptance by God. I mean, really, even if this younger son worked hard all his life, would he really be able to pay back what the father has lost in terms of the loss of his dignity and respect in the community, and even in the value of the land? No way.

The younger son wants to earn back his place in the family like the older son. But look at the older son, with all his good works; he too is estranged from the father's love. He is resentful and angry. He wants to control the father with his good works, but the father tells him in **verse 31** that, with or without his good works, all he has belongs to him anyway.

- 4) **Verses 1 and 2** of this passage tells us that the two groups of people to whom Christ narrated this story were the tax collectors and the Pharisees.

These two groups of people are represented in this story by the younger son and the older son. The first group are those like the younger son, who are not religious, and who aware that they are lost, like the tax collectors. The second group are like the older brother, who are not aware that they are lost because of their religiosity and their good works, like the Pharisees.

In this story, Christ is saying that both groups are lost in their sin and estrangement from God. In this story, the father is saying to both lost sons that his love for them does not depend on their good works. Instead, it depends on his unmerited favour. Both sons owe the father everything, it is not the other way round because the father owes them nothing at all, but he loves them freely all the same.

John 16:8 explains that it is the Holy Spirit who opens our inner eyes to enable us see ourselves as lost sinners in need of repentance and God's salvation. **Eph. 2:8-9** teaches us that we are saved by the grace of God through God's gift to us of the faith that we place in Christ, which of course, includes our repentance, and it goes on to declare that our salvation is not by, or through our good works, so that no one can boast about their salvation, as though they have earned it.

The younger son cannot boast and neither can the older son. The father accepts them both based on his love for them displayed in his costly grace and mercy. His grace and mercy to his younger son's rebellion is costly because it means that he accepts the loss of a third of his land. His grace and mercy to his older son is costly because it means overlooking his lack of love and his disrespect for him.

- 5) Christ depicts this costly grace and mercy of God by telling us that the father went out to both sons, to bring them in. Did you notice that in the story?

Let me explain another way in which Christ depicts God's costly grace in this story.

In this story, although He doesn't say so, Christ is implying that a true elder brother would have seen the agony of the father when the younger son left home, and he would have offered to go out to look for his younger brother, at his own expense, and to bring him home.

In this story, instead of such a good and true older brother, we have an older brother who is angry. He is angry because, in that culture, at that time, as we read in **Deut. 21**, if you had two sons, as in this story, when you died, your estate would be divided two-thirds to the elder, and one-third to the younger, because the oldest always got a double portion of what all the other children got.

So, if there were only two sons, the oldest son got two-thirds, the youngest got one third. This means that, after the father sold a third of the land and gave the money to the younger son, whatever is now left of the estate belongs to the older brother. The younger brother could now only inherit anything in that family at a great cost to the older brother, and he was furious about this.

Heb. 2:11 tells us that Christ is our older brother who is not ashamed to call us his brothers. In this story of the two sons, therefore, Christ is telling us that He was not just an elder brother who needed to go out into the next town to find us and bring us home, like the older brother in this story. Christ is telling us that He is the true older brother who came all the way from heaven to earth to seek and to save us, at the cost of his life.

On the cross, Jesus Christ was stripped naked so that we could be clothed in a robe of God's righteousness that we don't deserve, like the younger son in this story, because you see, the best robe in the house that the father asked to be brought to the repentant son in **verse 22**, was the father's own robe.

In this story, again, the ring the father asked to be brought to the son, was a sign of the father's own authority, the sandals he asked to be brought to the son was what would distinguish the son from the father's slaves and workers, who in those days, went barefoot. The fattened calf spoke of a special occasion of rejoicing.

In other words, the father was demonstrating his complete acceptance of his repentant son.

On the cross, Christ, our true elder brother, was forsaken by the Father so that we could be received and completely accepted by the Father. In and through Christ on the cross, as **2 Cor 5:19** tells us, God was reconciling the world of lost younger and lost older brothers to Himself.

- 6) In this story, Christ is saying, I am the true elder brother who lost everything so that both the lost younger brothers of this world in their rebellion, and the older brothers of this world, in their empty religiosity, could be saved.

Christ was offering salvation to both the tax collectors and the Pharisees who were listening to Him narrate this story.

- 7) So, we can summarize **our third S** by saying that, the only way we can receive the **salvation** from sin that God offers to us through the gospel, is when we respond to the gospel with repentance faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross for us, instead of our relying on our good works and our self-righteous religiosity.

Conclusion

I hope you can see how, from these **3S's** in **Luke 15**, Christ helps us to understand the gospel, He shows us why we all need the gospel, and He explains how we can personalize the gospel in our lives.

I don't know which of the two groups you belong to this morning as you hear this, but whatever group you belong to, the Lord is calling you back home today through your repentance and faith in what Christ did for you on the cross. That is the only way back home to the heavenly Father. It can never be based on your good works and your self-righteous religiosity.

Perhaps you feel like the younger brother who has squandered his life in wild living, and nothing is going right in your life. Or perhaps you feel like the older brother thinking that God owes you something for all your goodness and religiosity.

There are three essential steps involved in accepting God's offer of salvation to you today.

First, you should allow the Holy Spirit to show you that, because you too are a descendant of Adam, you are a sinner in need of God's salvation offered to you in the gospel. Second, you should thank God that, instead of punishing you for your sins, He sent Jesus Christ to take upon Himself on the cross the punishment due to us for your sins, and you ask Him to forgive you because of Christ's work on the cross on your behalf. Third, you ask the Lord to fill you with His Holy Spirit so that you can now live a life that pleases God. *Sorry. Thank you. Please.*

This is how you can personalize the gospel in your life today and begin to live the life of a prodigal son or daughter who has returned home to his or her heavenly Father.

Share my own story of returning to the Father.

Let us pray!

*Rev. Canon E. Kwasi Amoaf, PhD.
Tigoni,
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