

Do You Share the Joy of Heaven?

Luke Series #39

Luke 15

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Please open your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15. This is a very well-loved chapter in the Bible and the stories in it are so familiar. Three parables, all of which are speaking the same basic truth: heaven rejoices in the repentance of one lost sinner. Heaven's joy is radiant throughout this chapter. Someone has said that hearing these three stories is like hearing the same melody played by three instruments. But while there is gladness in heaven, there is grumbling on earth. From the religious people, from the Pharisees and the scribes, they cannot understand why Jesus has such a heart for sinners; why He associates with them so closely and eats with them. That's why He's telling these parables.

So we're going to approach the preaching of the Word from a little bit different angle that I only do on rare occasions. I think that it will be helpful for us to step into the shoes of one of the characters in the parable of the two lost sons. I will be preaching from the perspective of the older brother. I do this—not to be dramatic or creative—but rather to help us identify with the people to whom Jesus first spoke these parables: the Pharisees, the scribes and the religious people.

Let's prepare our hearts for the preaching of the Word as we read God's Word. Luke chapter 15:

¹ 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."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?

⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just

so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'how many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

This has been the worst day in my life and at the same time it has been the greatest day in my father's life. I cannot remember a time when I've been as angry as I've been today. Never has a son hated his brother like I've hated mine. And never has a father loved his sons the way my father has loved us this night. I despise calling him brother, this other son of my father. The rage I feel toward him has been building for years.

It started simmering when the two of us were growing up under the same roof. I was the good son. He was the good-for-nothing son. Wherever he wanted to go, he went. Whatever he wanted to do, he did. His desires knew no limit. He would scheme and manipulate to take as much from our father as he could get. The only four letter word that wasn't in his vocabulary was

W-O-R-K. He was a helpless, lost cause long before he hit the road. A selfish, lazy, ungrateful, rebellious, greedy, defiant disgrace of a man, he became. And I, I could see it coming long before my father could. Many times I wished my father would just kick him out of the house.

But my father was patient, long-suffering to a fault. The more he put up with that son of his, the more indignant I became. But I didn't show it. I just kept slaving away on my father's farm, waiting for the day when that other son would ruin himself for good. Then who would be left standing? Good behavior, hard work—they always pay off in the end. At least, that's what I'd imagined.

It was no surprise to me when that scoundrel broke my father's heart. I remember the night he showed up for dinner for a change and before the table was even cleared, he demanded that my father give him his share of the property. He had waited as long as he could, thinking maybe our dad would die soon and spare him the awkward spectacle. But his selfish desires overruled any kind of dignity or respect. I always knew that I couldn't count on him to care for the old man in his later years but this? This was the ultimate insult. The shame he brought on our family's name has lingered to this day. I thought for sure my father would stand up finally—stand up to him and defend his honor. Any other self-respecting nobleman would have given him a verbal and a physical beating, then cast him out. But not my father. He divided his property, his livelihood, his symbol of status in the community. He literally broke his life apart when he gave that property away. But it meant nothing—nothing to that son of his.

In no time at all, he liquidated his share of the property; selling it for a trifle of its worth just to line his greedy pockets with enough cash to fuel his lusts. Then he disappeared. He left home as fast as he could. He got as far away from us as possible and he was not coming back. At least that's what I'd hoped. I had my informants—people keeping tabs on him. News would roll in from time to time about he was getting wasted. He spared no expense; denied himself no pleasure. The fanciest clothes, most luxurious meals, the raciest entertainment. He was a prodigal in the classic sense. A man who squandered all he had in reckless abandon. Finally, the famine came. At last, justice was served. He got what he deserved. He landed right where he belonged—in the pigpen of a pagan. Who wouldn't want to get out of there? No wonder he started thinking a little differently about home. What wouldn't look better than the squalor of a swine farm? They say there's nothing a hungry man won't do for a loaf of bread so what credit is it to him that he finally came groveling home. I see no cause for celebration.

Man, I wish I could have been the first one to see him on the horizon. I know exactly what I would have done. There would be no reconciliation without compensation. It would take that worthless son a lifetime of slavery to make up for all the shame he's brought on us. I would look

down on his filthy head and I'd say, "You stay away from here and never come back. You've dishonored your father. You've wasted our wealth. You've ruined our family's name. Spare your dying father the grief of having to look at your face again. If you come one step closer, if you so much as show your face around here, I'll call this whole community together and we will cut you off. We'll make you a homeless wanderer forever. You'd be better off with the swine."

That's what I would have done, I tell you. That's what I would have done if I'd only had the opportunity to do it. After all, it's my duty to protect our father's honor. All that son of his has earned is condemnation, scorn and shame. But as much as I am not like my prodigal brother, I'm not at all like my father either. The longer I live, the more distant I feel from my father.

I should have known when I heard the music and dancing. The truth is, in my heart of hearts, I did know. The last time we had a celebration in this household was when this family was all intact. Since the day my brother left, my father has been watching; he has been waiting. I'd see him at dawn, at dusk—every hour in between—gazing forlornly into the distance. He didn't need to say a word. I knew what he was looking for. The very fact that my brother's absence filled his heart with anguish filled my heart with anger. Why couldn't he just let go of that worthless son? Especially when he had me working for him day and night. I am the model son. Here I am, staying at home, maintaining the family business, doing everything I'm told. Succeeding at every point where that miserable son of his failed. I've never disobeyed a single command of his. Why am I not good enough for him? Why can't he just focus on me and forget about that punk?

They tell me Dad ran to meet him while he was still a long way off. How embarrassing. An old man lifting his robe, baring his legs, running in public, causing a scene in front of the whole community. Children run. Women run. But noble fathers do not run in public. And then, instead of slapping him and spitting in his face like he deserved, my father fell on his neck and embraced him and covered him with kisses.

Now they tell me that he's in there. He's laughing and dancing. He's wearing his best robe. He's clothed in my father's glory and honor and there's a new ring on his hand signifying that he's been reconciled and accepted back into the family just like that. Not even a day's restitution. Instead of the bare feet of a servant, he's wearing shoes like a son. They killed the fattened calf for him; that calf that we've been saving for a special occasion. Who's paying for all that? Surely it's not coming out of his swine farm earnings. Every dime that my father spends on him, he's taking away from me. This is the greatest night in my father's life. His son who was lost is back, safe and sound.

But I am not about to share in my father's joy. At this moment, I could not care less about my father's honor. In fact, I am determined to teach him a thing or two about what's right and what's wrong for a change. No matter what my absence would cause, no matter the shame that would be brought on him, if I don't show up in that feast, there's no way that I am going to be humiliated and watch that wretched son of his bask in the limelight.

Then, as I was pacing the ground and nursing my grudge, fueling my rage, I heard the music stop. I turned around and there he was. My father came out of that feast to meet me. Twice in one day, my father put his own honor on the line. Twice in one day, my father risked humiliation in the sight of his people. Only this time, I thought, he's coming to a son who deserves some attention; he's coming to a son who deserves some respect and vindication. Now I was the one bringing shame on my father. I was personally and publicly insulting him but at this point I believed he deserved it. This confrontation had been a long time in coming. As my father started pleading with me, my boiling anger erupted in a fit of rage. In light of my obvious moral superiority, this—I was sure—was righteous anger.

I couldn't even look him in the eye and call him father. I just lit into him. "Look you, let me get this straight. This son of yours in there—that selfish, arrogant, ungrateful, profligate—he came to you and told you he wished you were dead. He took what would still be earning us interest. He went to Sin City and flushed it all down the drain. Your hard-earned wealth. The legacy of generations. Our family's honor. He trashed it. He caroused with prostitutes. He slept with swine. Now he comes traipsing back in here and you fall all over him like a silly old man. You killed the fattened calf for him? What about me? I could never get away with this kind of behavior. Here I am. I've been slaving away for you all these many years. I've never done anything to hurt you. I've always obeyed your every command.

"Oh, I get it. These are the ground rules in this messed up family of ours: 'You obey and nothing happens. You disobey and Dad throws a party.' Silly me. What would it take for me to get a party thrown in my honor? You don't even need to give me a fattened calf. Just a measly old goat would do. In fact, you don't even need to come to my party. Spare yourself the trouble. Just let me celebrate with my friends and we'll have a good time without you."

I felt pretty good putting my foot down, boycotting this party. Then I looked into my father's eyes and what I saw was not anger, but love. What I heard was not rejection, but entreaty. What I felt was not contempt, but compassion. His response took me off guard. His words tempered my rage, thawed my resentment and punctured my pride. "Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this, your brother, was dead. He's alive again! He was lost and now he's found." He gazed at me for what felt like

an eternity, pleading with me to come in, to enter into his joy. Then he stepped away, back into that glad celebration. Parties like this can go on for days in my culture.

I haven't decided yet whether I will humble myself. Whether I will go in and share in my father's joy. But the feast is spread. The doors are open. The invitation has been given and my father's words have left me searching. Searching my own heart. May they do the same for you. Could it be that even though I've stayed home and done my duty, tried to obey, kept down the family farm—could it be that even though I've been the good son, I'm just as lost as my brother who ran far, far away? How else can I explain how all these years I've been with my father but I've never really understood him? Why have I never really trusted his love? Why have I never really felt much love from him in return? Why do I see my father as the master and myself as the slave? What makes me resent my service for him?

Yes, I'm obedient but why is it that I often hate obeying? Why in all my obedience isn't there any happiness, any freshness, any vitality? Yes, I've been dutiful but where is the delight? Why is my heart so hard? Why have I never been broken by my own sin? Why have I never felt like I've needed any grace? Why have I seen all of my brother's faults but been so smug and complacent toward my own? Why is it that being my father's son does not satisfy me? I've always been with him but have I ever been near him? All the meals we've eaten together, all the nights we've looked upon the stars, all the mornings we've gone out together to feed the cattle. All that he has he has shared with me. But have I ever given my heart to him? When's the last time I went to him and said, "Father, I just want you to know how much I love you." Ever?

It's dawning on me tonight. I'm starting to understand that my father sees no distinction between my brother and me. Both of us are equally in need of our father's grace. Both of us are equally the objects of our father's yearning love. Both of us were strangers toward our father's joy. Neither of us enjoyed our father for who he is. Both of us demanded his gifts without desiring his fellowship. But tonight one of us has come home and I have not been glad but grumbling. I have not been rejoicing but resentful. I have felt bitter and betrayed by my father's goodness. Why? Why do I recoil at such mercy? It's because all these years I've wanted to see myself as above the need for it.

My brother has separated himself from our father through his wild and disobedient living. But I've separated myself from our father through my own dutiful service. My brother's sinfulness kept him from rejoicing in our father's love. But my own self-righteousness kept me from rejoicing in our father's love.

Yes, I'm a living example to you today of how you can be in the father's house, yet far, far away from the father's heart. You can be lost even when you're home. You can obey his laws but

be outraged by his love. You can make sacrifices for him day and night, yet all the while be an adversary of his mercy.

When my father said those words, “This your brother,” it was the first time in ages that I thought of him like that. I can’t remember the last time I looked at him and thought, “My brother. My little brother.” What kind of brother have I been to him? Where was I when he went astray? Why was I not there for him when his funds were depleted? Why did I not go looking for him when he hit rock bottom. Why did I not go find him in that swine trough and say, “Come on my brother, let’s go home”? If the roles were reversed, if I was the prodigal, I would desperately need an older brother who was just the opposite of me. I would need a brother who would go into the far country to seek me and find me. I would need a brother who wouldn’t hold my rebellion and wastefulness against me but who would bring me back at any risk, at any cost, to himself. I would need one who, in spite of all I’ve squandered, would not be ashamed to call me his brother.

Does such an older brother exist? You’re hearing my story today because he does. His name is Jesus. Everything the Father has is His but He was willing to lose it all for me and for you. He left his Father’s throne above and came down to seek and to save us who are lost. He was stripped naked on the cross so that we could be clothed in His robes of righteousness. He took the cup of wrath so that we could drink the cup of joy in the feast of heaven. He came and found us in the pigsty of our rebellion and He rescues us for the courtyards of His Father’s house. Like a Good Shepherd, He carries us on His shoulders. Like a woman who loses a coin, He searches and scours the ground and finds us. Like a perfect older brother, He opens wide the gates of his Father’s house. He says to us when we’re wretched, poor, pitiful, blind, naked and lost, “Come home. Come home, brother. Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. Bring the fatted calf, kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this son of my Father was dead and he’s alive again. He was lost and now he is found.”

This older brother says, “I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” My older Brother receives sinners. He eats with them. If you’re lost, Jesus knows how to find you. He is seeking you right now. It doesn’t matter if you’re lost in a far country or you’re lost at home. It doesn’t matter whether you’re lost in sin and reckless living or whether you’re lost in self-righteousness and slavish obedience. You’re lost.

You have a true elder Brother—a perfect elder Brother. The kind of Brother all of us need. He seeks brazen sinners in the far country and blinded sinners in the church. He seeks and saves

the lost; not the righteous. He seeks and saves sinners who will share in Heaven's joy. If you're searching, it's because He's seeking. You would not be searching for Him had He not already found you. Hear Him. Heed His voice. Come home. Come home. Amen.

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