

SERMON NOTES

Third Sunday of Great Lent
The Prodigal Son

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 15:1-32

WHEN HEAVEN REJOICES

INTRODUCTION

During the final year of Jesus' ministry, Luke records, all sorts of people followed him on His last journey to Jerusalem, where He knew He would be crucified. The great crowds that gathered to listen to Him included two very different groups—the very religious and the very sinful. The very religious were those from the rulers who, as lawyers, interpreted the Law of Moses and imposed supplemental requirements of their own upon the people. These religious lawyers and teachers were the scribes and Pharisees. They prided themselves on their knowledge of, and obedience to, all of God's commandments. They also prided themselves on keeping themselves ritually pure and clean. They, therefore, avoided all that would in some way contaminate their purity. Association with members of the other group, the very sinful, would cause ritual impurity—or so they believed. The very sinful were written off in their minds as condemned by God and without hope.

The other group, the very sinful, gathered to hear the teachings of the one Light in their dark world. Though He never condoned their sin, He offered hope and love instead of rejection. Whereas the religious teachers carefully kept even the ends of their skirts from touching a passing 'sinner,' Jesus not only touched them, He accepted their hospitality and dined with them in their homes. Jesus' display of friendship towards the 'sinners' was shocking to the very religious. Even as the lawyers gathered to listen to His words, they were constantly muttering criticism against Him.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 15:1-32

Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

And He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost,

until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

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 which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And He said, "A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them.

And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'" '

And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt

compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him.

And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. 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.'

But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.'

And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' "

NOTES

Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him¹ to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Tax-gatherers were a group of men who collaborated with the Roman oppressors often against their own fellow countrymen to collect taxes. They were allowed to gouge out their own

¹ Pronouns, Him and He, which are capitalized, refer to Jesus Christ.

commission from the helpless tax-payers.² *Sinners* were reprobates, such as prostitutes, thieves, murderers, and others, that the Pharisees and scribes condemned for not keeping the law.

Pharisees were members of a religious group who were well skilled in the Law, and promoted themselves as highly favored by God to the people. They strictly observed the written Law as well as the oral law, much of which may have been their own work.³ Scribes, also called lawyers, were those who copied the Law from one manuscript to another, and therefore, knew it very well. Both Pharisees and scribes were teachers of the Law.

“Receives and eats with them” refers to Jesus’ close social contact with the *sinners*. Dining with them, accepting their hospitality, especially emphasized this close contact. This conduct on the part of Jesus really scandalized the very religious group.

And He told them this parable, saying,

A parable is a short fictional story in which the characters either illustrate or symbolize some truth, religious principle or moral lesson. Jesus told three parables in our reading. All three were a defense of His conduct that the very religious criticized. By their natural identification with the persons of the first two stories, the third story demonstrated the departure of the very religious group from an attitude that should have come naturally—joy over a found brother.

“What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

The question allows His critics to place themselves in a fictional circumstance in which they would definitely react in the way Jesus described.

The story does not address who is caring for the other sheep while the man searches for the lost sheep. That point is probably assumed because no one would endanger his flock by leaving them unattended.

The man is not angry with the sheep for straying away; he is simply joyful over its recovery. His loving care is shown by his carrying the sheep home.

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 which was lost!’

The party for his friends and neighbors further underscores the man’s great joy. The sheep was precious to the man.

² See Luke 3:12-13.

³ The Rabbis, who later took up the role of the Pharisees, claim that the oral Law was given at Sinai at the same time as the written Law. Josephus mentions the writings of Moses, insinuating that these writings were the Law Moses received. [III, XV, 3], and also that Moses wrote all the laws in a book which he delivered to the people [IV, VIII 3 and 44]; but another different oral law is not mentioned. When Josephus discusses the writing of the LXX, there is only the mention of written law [XII, I ff.]. Elsewhere, he does mention the fact that the Sadducees only accepted the written Law, implying that in the first century AD, there was an oral law in existence.

I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

This statement is meant to make the critics of Jesus ask themselves why they do not share the joy God feels over a repentant sinner.

The Jews of that day did not pronounce the name of God, so *heaven* and other words were used in place of His Name. However, *heaven* may also have in view not only God, but also the angelic court that surrounds Him.

Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’

Men are not the only ones who counted themselves among the very religious. Jesus addressed the women as well. In his question to them, they would nod assent. In this case the coin the woman lost was worth about one day’s wages. Again the party for her girl friends underlines her great joy.

In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The very religious women must now reflect on their own attitude about ‘sinners.’

And He said, “A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ And he divided his wealth between them.

In this third parable, Jesus has moved from one precious sheep among one hundred, and from one silver coin among ten, to one son of only two. The sons will illustrate the two kinds of people listening to Jesus—the ‘sinners’ on the one hand, and on the other hand, the very religious, who see themselves as always obeying God. It also illustrates how a very loving parent reacts to his children. Even a strict Pharisee who truly loved a wayward son could identify with this father.

A double portion of the estate would fall to the eldest son upon the death of the father.⁴ The remainder of the estate would be divided among the remaining sons. This division could be made before the death of the father, but he would still remain in control of the major share until his death. In this story, the younger son received one third of the estate and the elder son received twice as much.

And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

The younger son evidently converted his portion of the estate into portable wealth, no doubt through a sale of his interests.

⁴ Deuteronomy 21:17.

The distance did not prevent reports of the son's life-style reaching the ears of the family back home. We know this from the elder son's comments later.

After squandering all his money, the son had nothing with which to buy his necessary food (he was *in need*). For a Jew to stoop to feeding swine was the depths of degradation. His employer was obviously a Gentile. The very religious among Jesus' listeners would have been appalled. The actions and situation of the younger son were as bad as—or worse than—any of those of the *sinners* in the crowd listening to Jesus.

And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

The pods were the carob pods that sometimes very poor people ate.

But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' '

The son finally realized how stupidly he had acted in leaving his loving father. From the description of the servants he retained, the father was obviously a very wealthy man. [One-third of the estate must have been quite a sum that the son had squandered.]

The son assumed that the father would forgive him; but he did not assume that the father would reinstate him as a son. The son knew that he had forfeited that honor.

In his repentance, the son rightly recognized that his sin was first of all "against heaven." Again, this use of *heaven* is a substitution for God's name. All sins are first and foremost against God. The son had rebelled against the laws of God he had been taught.

"And in your sight" is a recognition of the son's sin on the human level against his father.

And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him.

The father was able to recognize the returning son when he was still a great distance away.

"Felt compassion" is the translation here of *σπλαγχνίζομαι*, a verb whose noun form means intestines or bowels. In those days emotions were associated with this organ. Today we would use the organ *heart* to express this seat of the emotions. This compassion was a heartfelt emotion. The father's heart was deeply stirred as he recognized his son. The other verbs emphasize the love the father felt. He ran, he embraced and he kissed.

And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us

eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ And they began to be merry.

The father interrupted the son after the confession that he had sinned. The rest of the prepared speech was the son’s hope of how the situation would be handled by the father.

The father had his own ideas of how he would handle the situation. The son only hoped to be made a hired servant. The father accepted him again into the family.

The “best robe” was a long flowing garment of honor, and the kind that the scribes loved to go around in. The ring and the sandals (sandals were not worn by slaves) were generous signs that the father received him back as a son.

The fattened calf was reserved for very special events. This was definitely not the reception that the younger son had expected.

The joy that the father felt is even greater than the joy the owner of the sheep and the woman had felt over their lost possessions: for the father, the son had not only been lost, he had died. For someone to abandon the Law of the LORD was to choose death according to Deuteronomy 30:19-20. This may explain the view of the father that his son was every bit as removed from him as if he had died. The Pharisees and the scribes would have related to this view, and should have then understood the joy over the sons ‘return to life.’

Following the pattern of the first two parables, the story should end here with the joyous celebration over the lost son who was found. But the story continues to show the very religious group that, in this case, they do not identify with the joyous father as would be natural, but with the unnatural attitude of the elder son.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be.

The home, as usual, was in the town, some distance from the fields.

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.’

‘Safe and sound’ means that the son was healthy.

But he was angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him.

The elder son was livid when he heard the news. The father (apparently having been told) came out to urge the elder son to join the celebration.

But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.’

‘Look!’ is a good translation of the elder son’s opening statement. Coming from a son to a father it strikes one as rude and unbecoming.

There are two causes for the son's anger. The elder son feels under appreciated. In addition, there is jealousy over the treatment of the younger son.

"Been serving you" could be translated as "working like a slave for you."

Notice that he does not refer to the younger son as "my brother," but as "this son of yours."

"Devoured your wealth with harlots (prostitutes)" indicates that news had reached the family about the life-style of the younger son. The elder son brings this up to contrast the vast difference in the actions of the two sons. The one worked like a slave for the father's interests, and the other wasted the father's wealth. The father's treatment is deemed unfair.

And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' "

The father responded to the indirect accusation that he was unfair:

By using the term, "My Child," the father overlooks the rudeness of his son and expresses tender love for him. They have constantly been together (surely that has been a plus for the elder son?). The estate that the elder son has worked so hard for is his own property (so why did that effort call for appreciation from the father?). No wrong has been done to the elder son. The criticism of the elder son is what is actually unfair.

Notice that the father does not say "this son of mine" in reflection of the elder son's usage, but instead, "this brother of yours," reminding the elder son of his relationship to his brother. Notice also that the father uses the pronoun 'we.' The father had lost a son, but the elder brother had lost his only brother. Where is his natural and proper joy at the return of his own brother from the dead?

"Was lost and has been found" repeats the saying in the other two parables and underscores the thought that ties all the stories together.

The parables were illustrations of the joy the Father in heaven feels at the recovery of one lost sinner. In this last story, Jesus showed the scribes and Pharisees a picture of themselves in the angry and critical elder brother. In contrast, Jesus, Who knows the deep love of the Father for the lost sinners, is doing the work of a *proper* son and brother to bring them home.

APPLICATION

From our human perspective, it is hard to accept the teaching that really bad people can repent and be saved in the last second of their lives and live eternally with God. It just seems so unfair that they will be accepted. What real difference does it make if we have tried hard all our lives to please God when reprobates can repent at the last second and be as accepted as good people? So we conclude, "It is just not fair, and so that teaching must not be true!"

Our reading—especially this parable of Jesus most popularly known as "The Prodigal Son"—addresses that issue. Is this a matter of fairness, or love, or maybe both? Two other short little stories told by Jesus preface our parable. One is about a man, and the other about a woman.

In the first, one of his sheep is lost and the shepherd sets out to find it. Ninety–nine other obedient sheep are not lost, but the shepherd leaves them to find the wayward one. This raises some eyebrows among us, but Jesus presented the actions of the shepherd as quite normal.

The story about the woman involves ten pieces of money; one coin of the ten was lost. The woman expended a great deal of energy sweeping her house until she found it. Some conclude that the woman was very poor because the coins were not worth very much. But actually, one coin was worth a day’s wages and, thus, would be important to anyone. Again, Jesus presented the actions of the woman as quite normal.

Jesus’ point in both stories was the natural joy the owners felt upon the recovery of their lost possessions. The joy was so great to both the shepherd and the woman that they held parties to celebrate with their friends and neighbors—like we might do if we won the lottery. Jesus used both stories to illustrate how joyful God is over even one repentant sinner. He is more joyful than He is over ninety-nine people “who need no repentance.” Does that seem fair? Before we judge, we need to ask, “Who *are* those “ninety-nine that need no repentance?” How many of us would fall into that category? Not me.

This brings us to the major parable of our reading. In this story, there are not one-hundred children, or ten children, but only two sons of a father. The youngest leaves the father’s home taking with him an early payment of his personal inheritance. He uses his wealth to live a wild and free, immoral life. When the money is gone, hard times hit, and the younger son is reduced to starving in abject poverty.

Then he remembers his father, a good and generous man who treats even his hired men very well. He deeply repents that he has so sinned against God and against his father. He knows that he is no longer worthy to be a son, but perhaps his father would take him back as a hired worker on the estate. The lost son resolves to return, repenting for his sins and the shame he has brought on his good father.

Just as the story of the lost sheep was really about the shepherd and his joy over the sheep’s recovery, and the story of the lost coin was really about the woman and her joy over the coin being found, this story of the prodigal is really about the father and his reaction to the return of one of his beloved sons. The old man literally runs to meet the wreck of a son he recognized even from a great distance. We can only imagine how the father must have been watching and waiting, hoping against hope. And now, his joy is boundless that his son is alive and come home. He throws his arms around him and covers his son’s neck with kisses, dresses him in finery and orders a huge celebration. Such is the great love of this father. Jesus’ point was that our Father’s love is no less for lost men and women, boys and girls.

But is this fair? The older son did not think so. He felt the younger son was a complete reprobate and should be given no consideration whatsoever. He would not even think of this man as his brother. He wanted to have nothing to do with him and was angry that the

father did not react as he himself did. He had lost a brother but unlike his father, he felt no joy at his return.

The elder son prided himself that he obeyed the father in everything, just like the scribes and Pharisees. But he would not rejoice with the father. The elder son damned the younger; just like the group of very religious people listening to Jesus damned the ‘sinners.’ If there was grief for the loving father because of the sins of the younger son, was not the father grieved as well by the loveless conduct of the elder? Yes, and more so.

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus is the truly obedient son who did the *complete* will of His Father. Jesus knows the love of the Father for the lost. He knows it is the perfect will of the Father that all be saved. Jesus therefore made it possible for them to return by sacrificing Himself—submitting to death on the Cross. It is not our years of service to God that saves us, but faith in Him and *His* work on our behalf. Even now, He reaches out to all the lost to bring them to repentance, that their return might bring tremendous joy to the Father.

The scribes and Pharisees who despised those they considered ‘sinners’ broke the most important of the commandments:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind and strength,
And your *neighbor* as yourself.

The Pharisees too, needed repentance. Therefore, the “ninety-nine who need no repentance” was hypothetical. For in Romans we read that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”⁵ Even those of us who have turned to God with all our hearts find that we still sin and need His forgiveness daily.

Far be it from us, then, to criticize God for the great love that receives a repentant sinner even on his or her death bed. It is because of that great love that we ourselves have been saved. Therefore, let us rejoice with the Father when anyone in true repentance returns to Him. He indeed rejoices and all heaven with Him, for our Father rejoices over us.

⁵ Romans 3:23.