

## **Come to the Party, Luke 15:25-32**

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**Jonathan Wilson**

### **Introduction: The Point of Luke 15**

Today wraps up our series on the three stories that Jesus told in Luke 15. These all drive at the question that the religious types had asked, or rather, had sniped at Jesus. When Jesus sat down to eat with the wrong kind of people, they asked him why. In reply, Jesus described the shepherd going after a straying sheep, the woman sweeping her house to find her lost coin, and the patient father waiting for his rebellious son to come home again and be reconciled.

Jesus explains the first two stories by saying that angels rejoice for each sinner that repents. The story of the prodigal son describes a sinner who repents. Then Jesus adds to it the point of view of the older brother, which we read today, to challenge his critics: The older brother represents them in their religious pride, and in their fear of being tainted by sinners.

These sins also plague religious types today: Pride in one's virtue becomes meanness towards broken people, and fear of sinners causes religious types to run to courts and Congress rather than to proclaim good news. Pride and fear cause religious types to forget the big picture, which is that God in mercy and grace desires all people to be saved from the peril to their souls. God's mercy is what makes the good news good.

**Let us pray:** Lord God, open our hearts to receive your word and your Spirit; that today those who are lost may come to you in hope, and those who have remained with you over long seasons of life may display your heart of grace joyfully to the world. Amen.

### **1. Religious Pride**

By simply doing his duty, the older brother had the pride of virtue.

He stood in honor and respect in the family and in society. In this pride he believes: First, the honor of the family has been wounded by his younger brother; true. Second, his younger brother has practiced a depraved lifestyle; true. Third, his younger brother is alienated from the family by his own choices; true. Fourth, the younger brother bears the brunt of the shame; true. Fifth, I deserve my Father's love, he deserves my father's disdain.

"False." The older brother has let pride and the world's approval of his virtues blind him to the nature of his own father's love. The father does not love his children because they are GOOD, but because they are his CHILDREN. When one or another of his children is alienated from him, the father wants nothing more than for that child to be reconciled. The older brother might suppose that some sins, some kinds of wretchedness, are beyond the father's capacity to forgive and to love. But that is false.

The older brother had assumed that his father's love was conditional on the sons doing him honor, and when he found out he was wrong, his pride was hurt. His pride had rested on the premise that his Father agreed that he was better and more worthy of love than his brother.

The religious types at the time of Jesus also stood in honor and respect in society, and they took great care with distinctions in status and honor. For them, Jesus the celebrity prophet and faith-healer should sit in the places of honor, among themselves. Instead he sat and ate with the tax collectors and the people who associated with them. Even though they were wealthy, the tax collectors in the pay of Rome had no status in society. Imagine the gangsters of organized crime doing all their gangster things but with immunity from prosecution. Even though the money piles up, who do gangsters have for girl-friends? You get the picture.

Hearers of the parables in Luke 15 know that the elder brother is standing in the parable in the place of the religious elites in Israel. In a society of honor, status, and shame, people who

are poor but have honor are able to look down on those who are rich but have no honor. So the religious elites looked down upon the tax collectors and expected Jesus to do so as well.

When Jesus does not behave as expected, he does more than raise eye-brows, he provokes fear. The boundaries set by the religious types are more than just the shallow prejudices of polite society; these boundaries are set in order to secure the favor of God on Israel. So now we move from religious pride, to fear, the things that make religious types afraid.

### **3. What Makes Religious Types Afraid**

Among religious types the fear is that boundaries between what is holy and what is profane will become loose and vague when they should be firm. By being collaborators with Rome the tax collectors were partners with oppression, they were unpatriotic, they were political threats. Excluded from Israel's religious life on that basis, their only associates were those whose lifestyles also put them on the margins without status or honor. Thus they posed real dangers to the social, moral, and political fabric of ancient Israel in the minds and hearts of Israel's patriots.

No wonder the religious types are concerned, perplexed, and offended that Jesus crashes tax collector parties and sits with them at dinner. But this sounds familiar, does it not? When we hear self-declared evangelical leaders, they seem to talk a lot more about the threats of sinners to our nation's political, social and moral fabric, and a lot less about the invitation to sinners to enter into God's mercy. However, the religious types need not have been afraid, and need not be afraid today, for the boundaries are fixed and firm. The boundary between the holy and the profane can only be crossed, from the profane side, by repentance in Jesus's name, and from the holy side, by God's mercy for the sake of the ransom paid in Jesus' blood.

On God's side is the open heart and open door of mercy. On the human side is the repentance by which the sinner returns through God's open door to the path of life. That needs to

be enough for the Church and its religious types. That needs to be enough for you and me. When sinners repent, your arms and hearts and doors are to open to them, for you are the agents of God's peace and God's mercy.

For some religious types, repentance and mercy through the cross do not create a clear enough boundary between what is profane and what is holy. They want to set the boundary in a different place, like in the law, or on the basis of honor and shame, or on human philosophies of what makes a virtuous life versus a dissolute life. Many religious types define a person as good or bad based on their criminal record or their resumé of public service awards

The religious types did not know if they could trust the piety in the tax collectors and women of questionable repute who became followers of Jesus. That is the kind of suspicion that plagues religious types today. What if the new believers are not repentant *enough*? This person has alcohol on the breath, that person drops too many cuss-words. Religious types get used to people with good manners and are fearful of those whose manners are either different or untrained, or whose beliefs are unformed making their politics uncertain.

None of those can be used as reasons to shut anyone out. Repentant sinners at the beginning of their walk with God are not to be feared, they are to be embraced and enfolded. The church is a school for disciples. Maybe that new Christian will work harder on choosing more appropriate words, and I will work harder on nailing my gluttony to the cross, and you can work harder on your gossip, while all of us grow up together in Christ and in his service.

### **3. What Makes the Good News Good**

What makes the good news good is that God's mercy is unconditional. God does not love us because we are good, or because, having been bad, we turned over a new leaf and started behaving. God loves us because we are God's children, and that holds the door open in God's

heart to reconcile with anyone who will return to him.

God's mercy does not set a vague boundary: the chasm between the profane and the holy is bridged by the cross of Christ. The quality of God's mercy is not strained, Shakespeare was right; and, repentance is neither mitigated nor qualified; repentance is the sinner's surrender of the whole life to God. In faith in Jesus Christ the unconditional mercy of God meets the unconditional surrender of the sinner. That is the good news.

We have already discussed the fears in some self-described evangelicals who want to set the boundaries in a different place. The mistake in the other direction is that because God's mercy is unconditional, your repentance doesn't matter because sin doesn't matter. You're free to be you and I'm free to be me and I'm okay and you're okay and we're all okay. Do you want and when you go broke, go back to your Father and say, "Hey Dad! I need more money."

That is not the gospel either. In a movie from the 1980's called *Parenthood* Jason Robards is the patriarch of a family whose grown offspring cope, responsibly, with various problems, except the youngest, an irresponsible, unrepentant gambling addict played by Tom Hulce. He appears needing money. The older siblings don't want Dad to help him again. The father offers one last bail-out, with conditions: That the son seek treatment, that he show up to work in his Dad's firm and be trained to succeed him. The young man hears him out, but would rather Dad give him just a couple thousand dollars so that he can escape to South America. The father knows that he and his family will never see that son again.

Mercy is what makes the good news good, and repentance is what makes mercy available. In the story Jesus told the younger son showed unconditional surrender to his father, the father showed unconditional mercy to his son. The two together made reconciliation possible: Nothing more than repentance is required, and nothing less than repentance is sufficient.

## **Conclusion: Party Central**

Hearing the sounds of the party, the older brother asks a servant what is going on. The servant tells him of the younger's return, the joy of their father, and the joy of the whole household because he is, as the NIV puts it, "safe and sound." This suggests to me that the servant is aware of the wholeness of the relationship, the complete nature of the reconciliation, and that the servant has a grasp of the father's character that is deeper than the older son's.

Heaven becomes party central when it rejoices over the rescue of sinful souls. The sign of that rescue is the sinner's repentance. When the younger brother lives in rebellion and wretchedness he has no home with his Father. Then, when he comes to his senses and repents, his repentance becomes all that matters, and on that basis he is reconciled to the Father and restored to the family. For the older brother to be true to the heart of his Dad, he has to grasp this point: The father does not love his children on the condition that they are good or have proven themselves worthy; instead, the father loves them because they are his children, and that is why the door of his heart is always open to reconcile. There is only reason for joy that the brother, once on the path of his own self-destruction, is rescued from his peril.

The religious types who know their Bibles, if they are going to show the true heart of God to the world, need to grasp this point: That sinners are neither to be feared nor envied; instead, when sinners repent and find their way back to God, the religious types should cheer the loudest of all. The Church should be Party Central for the saved.

The story ends with suspense: Does the older brother join the party, or not? Jesus is asking you: Won't you please come in and rejoice with us and with your Father that the lost are found, and the dead are raised? If you feel like a prodigal, steeped in sin and broken and coming to your senses, God the Father's heart is open to you. Repent, surrender your life to God, and he

will raise you up. If you feel like the older son, weary from your service and yet fearful of new people and ideas entering the mix, you are invited to renew your repentance and surrender.

Repent of the pride that has developed over your decades of virtuous living, and repent of the fears that you have of a world run by lost people, and repent of the fear you have of new believers who have not yet grown up in their faith.

Repent, receive the good news that all that the Father has belongs to you, and come into the party of the rescued and the saved. Amen.