

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

PASTOR SANDY ADAMS

LUKE 15-16

Two uptown pastors were asked to speak at a gathering on the other side of the tracks. When they arrived they walked into a room full of drug addicts, prostitutes, and street people. Both men had prepared sophisticated lectures. The first pastor turned to his colleague, and said, “Man, I’m in trouble. My sermon won’t work with this crowd.” The second pastor admitted, “Me too.” The initial pastor whispered a solution, “I’ll tell you what... I’ll take the prodigal son out to the far country, and you bring him back home!”

It’s impossible to be conscious of your sin, and not be moved with emotion by this parable. No other passage conveys as convincingly the hope of God’s forgiveness. But the story of the prodigal son is one parable in a set of three. In Luke 15 Jesus talks about **a lost sheep, a lost coin**, and **a lost son**.

Verse 1, “**Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.** There was something about Jesus that attracted sinners. Author Phillip Yancey writes, “**Somehow we have created a community of respectability in the church. The down-and-out who flocked to Jesus when He lived on earth, no longer feel welcome. How did Jesus, the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect?**” The answer is love... *real, risky, reaching-out love!*

Once a kid from Chicago walked miles in the cold to attend D.L. Moody’s Sunday School. Someone asked him why he travel so far, when other Sunday Schools were closer. He replied, “**Because they love a feller over there!**” This is what the thieves, prostitutes, gang members, and drug dealers all sensed in Jesus - they knew He loved them. Jesus was able to reach sinners. This is what today’s church planters attempt to do by being *relevant*. The idea is to play the sinner’s style of music - speak his language - identify culturally. But nothing captures our heart more than knowing we’re loved. What made *Jesus so relevant to sinners is because He loved them.*

The Jewish leaders recognized this magnetism. “**And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”** These legalists didn’t grasp love. Judaism was about law – not love. Sadly, their religion had nothing to say to sinners. To become a part you first had to clean up your act, and earn your place, and pass the rituals. Sinners were left on the outside looking in.

The notion of a God who went out of His way to love and search for lost sinners, and restore them to His family was unheard of among the Jews. That’s why the three parables in this chapter were revolutionary.

“So (Jesus) spoke this parable to them, saying: what man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?”

A shepherd once explained how a sheep gets lost - *he nibbles his way into trouble*. He moves from one tuft of grass to another until he's through the fence, and has lost his bearings. He wanders off because of **foolishness**.

Likewise, many people have strayed from God down the slippery slope. They inched away. Their slide was imperceptible at the time. They walked away from God in itsy-bitsy steps. Like falling asleep on a float in the ocean. When you wake up you've drifted too far from shore to get back on your own. But there's a lifeguard. Call Him a shepherd. He loves the lone lost sheep to such an extent He's willing to leave the herd to fetch the one lost lamb.

Verse 5, “And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”

The shepherd doesn't even make the wayward sheep walk back on his own. He hoists it on His shoulders and carries it home - *even throws a party...*

“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

The Pharisees had an adage. “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.” Jesus played off their quotation to express God's heart! “There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.”

Verse 8, “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

A sheep gets lost through *foolishness*. You lose a coin by **carelessness**.

When Jewish women got married they wore a headdress consisting of ten coins. To lose a coin was the equivalent of a woman losing a wedding ring. It was an accident. She was careless, negligent. But when she realizes it's gone she frantically sweeps the house in search of this very valuable item.

“And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!' Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Heaven throws a party when one sinner repents - horns sound, confetti falls, balloons fill the air – it's like New Year's Eve at Times Square. We should get equally excited when a friend repents. I love it when people respond to an altar call and everybody claps. That's what heaven is like. Joy explodes in the heart of God when the lost are found.

Verse 11, “Then He said: “A certain man had two sons.”

Take note there were two sons. We usually focus on one of the boys – the prodigal – but we'll find the second son plays a crucial role in the story.

“And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together...” He's moving out. He's tired of the old man's rules. He's going to be his own man - live his own life. And he “journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his

possessions with prodigal living.” The word “*prodigal*” means “wasteful.” He wasted his life.

For a season this young man financed the porn shops and brothels. He ran up a huge bar tab. He partied hearty. He wasted not only his wealth - but his health, mind, and spirit. At fling’s end he was a shell of what he’d been.

Verse 14 “But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.” His wasteful and a slumping economy simultaneously hit their peak. Now he’s out of money and can’t get a job.

“Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.” This was a humiliating job, especially for a Jew who was forbidden to eat pork. This was not what he had in mind when he said he needed *to bring home the bacon!* “And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.”

Notice that last line, “*no one gave him anything.*” Trust me, while this guy had money he had friends. But when the funds dried up, so did the fun. *Where’s the love?* His posse has disappeared. He’s now on his own.

It’s been said, “Only after you hit rock bottom are you willing to look up.” Apparently, that was the case for the prodigal son. Verse 17, “But when he came to himself...” Finally, this boy came to his senses. Reality hit him.

“He said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’

When he came to his senses he remembered his father. Folks who worked for his dad were treated like kings compared to his own deplorable conditions.

“And he arose and came to his father.”

It reminds me of Romans 2:4 where Paul tells us its “the goodness of God (that) leads (a person) to repentance.” When this bad boy recalled his dad’s kindness he humbled himself and headed home. He decided to take his chances with dad. Here’s a good example of baseball in the Bible. As I read it, “the prodigal made a home run.”

The Jewish Talmud also told a story of a prodigal who returned home hoping his dad would restore him as a son. The father took him back, but as a servant, not a son. In the mind of the Pharisee a sinner could be forgiven, but he forfeited his right to be a son, and to enjoy the blessings of His Father. Full son-ship was out of the question. It was reserved for Pharisees not sinners. But that was not the portrait of God Jesus painted with His brush...

Jesus says, “But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.”

Years ago someone wrote a song entitled, “The Day God Ran.” God is never in a hurry. *Why would God ever need to run?* Well, His heart provokes it when he sees a prodigal humble himself and come home. Even when the son “*was still a great way off, his father saw him...*” Implied is that he was looking, and waiting, and hoping for his son to come home. It was the longings of love.

I imagine the kid walking down the road – his head down, his feet kicking dirt, he’s rehearsing his apology – he’s hoping his father agrees to meet him. What a surprise, when he sees dad running down the driveway. Before he says a word, dad hits him with a bear hug, and

smothers him with affection. And this is how God responds when one sinner repents and comes to Him.

Verse 21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.'" The family ring was a symbol of son-ship. The father isn't hiring a servant - he's restoring a son.

Then he says, "And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry." And just like heaven a party breaks out!

It reminds me of the Sunday School teacher who quizzed his class. "Boys and girls who was sorry when the prodigal son returned home?" One little boy raised his hand and answered, "*the fatted calf*." That's an excellent answer. But the answer the teacher expected is found in 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. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' But he was angry and would not go in." He pouts on the porch!

"Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him." This older son lived in his *father's house*, worked his *father's fields*, ate at his *father's table*, but he never really understood his *father's heart*.

In real life, the Pharisees were the elder brothers. They were proud of how they self-righteously served God, yet in truth they didn't even know Him.

If the elder brother understood his father's love he'd have joined the party! The Pharisees, like the older brother, spent so much time trying to earn their Father's favor they never stopped to appreciate and enjoy His mercy. That happens to religious people... They try to prove their goodness, and bolster their pride – instead of admitting their sin and need for God's grace.

Verse 29, "So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'"

I hope you feel this boy's bitterness. He doesn't say, "*my brother*" – it's "*this son of yours*." His heart was so full of self-righteousness it had no room for grace!

"And (the father) said to (the older brother), 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'"

One commentator writes, "In this chapter there are four lost items - a sheep, a coin, a prodigal son, and his elder brother. The first three are obviously lost. The fourth is lost and doesn't know it. He's the tragic one. He doesn't have any awareness of his lostness. He never strayed or broke the rules, and yet he missed out on the gift of the father's extravagant love."

You don't have to be an alcoholic, or a compulsive gambler, or a criminal to be a prodigal son. The **"far country"** isn't measured in miles, but the degree to which you've separated yourself from the grace and mercy of God. You may've lived your whole life in a Christian family, and in the confines of a church, but if your heart is cold, and arrogant, and self-righteous, and judgmental – something is desperately wrong. *You're an elder brother.*

The younger son was *unrighteous*. The older brother was *self-righteous*.

Both separate a person from God. For some of you it may be time to stop looking down your nose at other sinners, and admit you are one too. Confess and repent... *The Father desires that you join the party!*

Chapter 16 opens with another parable... Shakespeare wrote a comedy, **"The Taming of the Shrew."** I call this parable, **"The Taming of the Shrewd."**

"(Jesus) also said to His disciples: 'There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.'"

A **"steward"** was an ancient office manager. A rich man would *hire him*, and *authorize him* to handle his business. His job was to be faithful. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 calls us *God's stewards*. He entrusts His business to us – and our job too is to be faithful. We need to please the Master.

For some reason the steward in the parable had failed in his job.

"So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg.'"

Apparently, the steward was afraid of that mean Mexican – you know his name, **"Manual Labor."** He was *too good* to collect the carts at Wal-Mart.

Yet he and his family are now about to be put out on the streets. In verse 4 he concocts a plan. **"I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'"**

One hundred measures of olive oil equal 800 gallons. It takes 450 trees to harvest that amount. This would've been the yearly profit of an average grove. This a good deal for the debtor. He can cut his debt in half by acting now.

"Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'"

One hundred measures of wheat equaled about 1000 bushels - which represented the yield on 100 acres. This guy can cut his debt 20%. Once again the steward was doing the debtor a huge favor.

"So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly."

Here's a trait we don't usually link with godliness - **"shrewdness."** The steward was cagey, crafty, resourceful, opportunistic, clever... The Greek word translated, **"shrewd"** is **"phronimos."** It means "practical intelligence." We would translate it **"common sense"** or **"street smarts."**

Someone said, "There is two type of people. Those who can do stuff and those who can get stuff done." This man knew how to use the system to accomplish his purposes. He was a survivor. He was a "*shrewd saint*."

Yet Christians are not always known for their business savvy. Jesus concludes, "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light." Even though we're citizens of heaven, we still have to navigate life on earth. Some believers are nice people who love God, but have zero business sense. *They always pay list price*. Negotiation is not a sin.

A Christian can be both *hard-nosed* and *soft-hearted*... We can be *true* to the values of heaven, while still being *shrewd* in matters on earth. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus warns us, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

As I see it, this servant was shrewd in five ways...

First, he had an eye of the future - a backup plan in case it was needed.

Second, he didn't burn bridges. He made friends that could help him later.

Third, he acts quickly and seizes an opportunity. If he'd waited a few days he may have no longer had the authority to negotiate the discounts.

Fourth, he created a win-win situation. He made the debtors happy. Apparently, his master was happy. And he certainly ended up happy.

Fifth, he followed his heart, but used his head. God guides us with quiet times and quick wits. Follow Christ, but don't leave common sense behind.

Verse 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home."

A cagey Christian uses *earthly means* to accomplish *eternal purposes*.

"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much." Faithfulness tends to be a character trait. If you're faithful in *one area* you're probably so in *lots of areas*.

"Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?"

Jesus is saying if you can't handle money, how can you be trusted with really important spiritual matters. You can't teach me to *thrive spiritually* if you can't *survive physically*. A church that *mishandles money* will probably *mismanage ministry*.

Verse 13 "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and mammon." – which means "*money*."

As we've pointed out before, here is how we know that God is against bigamy – *two wives*. Jesus tells us, "*No man can serve two masters*."

In reality, Jesus is saying you can't serve *God* and *gold*.

We all *want to please God*, and we all *need to make money*. But eventually there's a conflict. What's more important... *the promotion* or *your witness*? -*Your integrity* or *job security*? – *Pocketing that bonus* or *giving a tithe*? At some point, everyone has to choose if they'll serve God or money.

Here's the deal, *make money*, just don't *make more of it than you should*. Money is a tool to be use for God's glory, not an idol to be worshipped.

Verse 14 "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him." One paraphrase reads, "They rolled their eyes, dismissing Him as hopelessly out of touch." They felt superior to Jesus.

"And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." The ancient Jews, like some misguided American Christians, considered wealth a sign of God's blessing. Jesus says, "Not so! God is concerned with the contents of your heart – not your wallet."

God doesn't check our credit score, or net worth – He measures our heart.

Verse 16 "The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it." The Greek term translated, "pressing," means "to act with force or move violently."

Satan has a hold of us until God rips us from his clutches. Spiritually speaking, salvation is a violent, forceful act - like a jailbreak. Nobody just strolls into God's kingdom. Peace with God requires pressing toward Him.

Think of the launch of a NASA rocket. It takes a violent explosion to break free from Earth's atmosphere. Likewise, a controlled burn in our hearts is required to break the gravitational pull of sin. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we're born again, the Spirit supplies the sudden thrust that breaks the hold of sin and Satan – and launches us into orbit around God.

Jesus says, "And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail." The "yod" was the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The tittle was the squiggly stroke on the smallest letter. God's Word is infallible and unfailing down to the smallest stroke.

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery."

It's interesting, but not surprising, that on this occasion Jesus inserts a teaching on divorce in the midst of a discussion about money? *Why is that?* Statistics reveal a common reason couples get divorce is financial. In some marriages its not "until death do us part," its "until debt do us part."

Bad decisions, big bills, burdensome loans act like a wet blanket that can smother the fires of love. Yet Jesus reminds us financial struggles don't justify ending a marriage. To divorce a spouse for an unbiblical reason and remarry another is the equivalent of adultery. The Bible says, "God hates divorce."

Couples can overcome financial pressures by setting up a budget, and cutting up credit cards, and getting some help. Through *diligence* not *divorce*.

A young pastor, serving in his first church was worried about offending the members, so he closed his sermon with these words, "Now, my friends, if you don't believe these truths, there may be grave eschatological consequences." Afterwards an old farmer asked him, "Preacher, by "grave eschatological consequences" did you mean Hell?" The timid preacher stuttered, "Well, yes." He replied, "If that's what you meant then you better start saying so!"

Jesus had no problem *"just saying so!"* He talked a lot about Hell and was never afraid of offending someone's sensibilities. Jesus knew hell firsthand. He created it for the devil and his angels. Thus, He understood its horrors and torments. That's why He was diligent and passionate about warning us.

A 2008 survey revealed that 74% of Americans believe in heaven, while just 59% believe in hell. And here's the surprising stat, of the 59% that believe in hell, less than 5% admitted they really thought they were going there. Sadly, I'm afraid the percentage will be much higher. Jesus spoke so much about hell because He doesn't want a single human to end up there. Luke 16 gives us a glimpse of hell's horrors as a deterrent. Some people view this next story as a parable. Yet in all His other parables Jesus never uses a proper name. Here He mentions *"Lazarus."* Rather than a parable, this is a real account of two men and their journey into the afterlife.

Verse 19 *"There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table."* And if poor Lazarus' plight wasn't bad enough... *"Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores."* A rich man lived in opulence and luxury, while this poor man lived outside the gates of his house in abject poverty. As the prodigal son ate the pea-shells thrown to the swine, Lazarus ate out of the rich man's garbage.

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried..." his body that is. A different plight was reserved for his soul. *"And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom."*

Understand God's plan for man has progressed through the ages. And conditions in the afterlife are no exception. Eternity is under construction. In OT times when people died they went to a place called *Hades* - or in Hebrew, *Sheol*. Hades was a duplex. One side was *Abraham's Bosom* - a place of comfort, and refreshment, and pleasure. Jesus referred to it as *"Paradise"* when He spoke to the thief on the cross. Across a wide expanse, the other side - the dark side - was called the *bottomless pit*, or *Abusso*.

The rich man ended up in the bottomless pit. And Jesus describes his state as *"in torments"* - plural. What's mentioned here is *scorching heat*, and *relentless thirst*, and *eternal regret* - but hell is full of multiple sorrows. Hell has worms... and it's boredom... and there's smothering darkness. A *"bottomless pit"* has no bottom. There's nothing solid in hell - nothing to lean on. Hell is an aimless drift. Imagine, dangling forever - that's hell. Worst of all hell is the land of unfilled dreams - you're tortured by the *"what ifs."*

Jesus describes the rich man as being conscious of his own existence. *"He lifted up his eyes..."* He was aware of what was happening - *not on earth, but in Abraham's bosom*. He *"saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus..."* The former beggar was comforted, while the former rich man broiled like meat on a grill. That's when the rich man speaks out, *"Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'* Here's a revealing insight - the rich man never asks to leave hell. He never argues that he's gotten what he deserves. He understands any relief would be an act of *"mercy."* Sadly, he realizes his need for mercy a little too late.

In verse 25 Abraham replies. “But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.’” The tables get turned in the afterlife. All of a sudden, he is the beggar and Lazarus is the rich man! “And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.” Notice the sobering word “*fixed*.” When a person dies he doesn’t end up a bodiless spirit with wanderlust. Uncle Joe doesn’t get a weekend pass to visit Earth, and drop in on Junior’s Little League game.

It’s been 2000 years since Jesus told this story, and you can be sure the same rich man is still “*in torments*,” while the same Lazarus is still being “*comforted*.” And the same will be true a billion, trillion years from now. This is the grave consequence of death – when you pass from this life to the next you forfeit any possibility for change. Your status becomes “*fixed*.”

Lazarus isn’t even allowed to pay a visit to warn his family. “Then (the rich man) said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’” Faith comes by receiving the Word of God. And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' ”

It was just a few days later that another man named “Lazarus” – Mary and Martha’s brother - did rise from the dead. *But how did they treat Lazarus?* John 12:10, says the Jews plotted to kill him since he was turning folks to Jesus. People can witness a miracle, and still harden their hearts to the truth. Paul says in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” It’s not miracles, but God’s Word that provokes saving faith.

As I said earlier, the afterlife is a work-in-progress. At the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you.” He was speaking of heaven. Abraham’s bosom was a holding tank until sin was atoned for fully. After Jesus paid the price – once and for all - to forgive our sin - He went to Hades and rounded up those who had believed in the promise of salvation. Jesus cleared out Abraham’s bosom and took the believers waiting there into heaven. He brought them into the throne room and presence of God. Today, when a person dies their body returns to the dust - but Jesus immediately judges their spirit. Believers go straight to heaven. Unbelievers continue to suffer the torments of Hades. *I trust you’re headed to heaven!*