

Intro

Jesus so far...

Jesus today, Hypocrites! Vipers! Dead inside! *Why?*

Today I'd like to look at a famous passage with you. I'm sure most of you know it quite well, but I think many of us may have missed the point. I did for years. And understanding what this passage is really saying has had more profound an impact on my life than any other passage of scripture.

Turn to Luke 15:1

[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:

Who was Jesus Talking to?

We often think of the story of the Prodigal son as a message of hope to sinners (and it is!) but that's not the main point. Jesus was talking to the Pharisees.

Now Jesus begins to tell one long parable in three acts, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. (Prodigal Son) *Summarize*

Luke 15:11

[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.’

Famous, but misunderstood

This story is very famous. However, the story is so sentimentalized usually and largely misunderstood. What we’re trying to do is get a sense of how amazed the hearers would have been. This would have been an absolutely astonishing thing to hear.

The story

First, let’s look at the story again, I think we need a little explanation since we are so far removed from this story culturally.

In 1st century middle eastern culture, the sons received all of their father’s possessions and land as an inheritance upon his death. They really didn’t have much in the way of monetary wealth, as it was an agricultural society still. (Land, animals, servants.)

When a man died, tradition dictated that the older brother got a “double portion” of the inheritance. In this case, that would be two thirds. The younger brother got the other third.

So the younger brother goes to his father and says, (12) “give me the share of property that is coming to me.” Now this is an insult that is lost on us. It is tantamount to saying, “I wish you were dead. But since you’re taking so long, give me what’s mine.” And he did. Unheard of. You know the rest of the story... **He came back** (Summarize)

Too often the story stops here.

If we stop the parable there, and most people do in their memory and their thinking and very often in the preaching ... If you stop it there, we just kind of get a little moist and weepy-eyed and we get all kind of sentimental, and we say, “Aw,” and that the moral of the story is be forgiving, be loving, and be accepting.

Now I can guarantee you that none of the original hearers shared our sentiment about this story. **They were probably outraged.** Because **they understood** the climax and the point of the story.

The Point:

Both Sons Were Lost

This is where the story is astounding, Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees says, “Look at these two brothers. Look carefully. They are both lost. They are both alienated from the father’s heart.”

Two Ways to Reject Jesus

Unrighteousness or Self-Righteousness

Loose living or moral living

sinner or pharisee

Both are lost.

We know the unrighteous are lost.

So did Jesus’ hearers. That’s why they were astonished that he would hang out with them. Everyone knew they were lost. The real **shock** here is that **they can be found.**

This parable is a warning.

This is an absolute, in-your-teeth warning to **good** people. In this entire chapter Jesus Christ is saying nothing comes between you and God like morality and goodness and decency and respectability.

We all know the younger brother is lost. We all know the drug addict is lost, what Jesus saying, is so is the older brother. So is the preacher.

He's holding up a mirror to the Pharisees, telling them, this is you.

Now do you realize what this means? Jesus is saying to the religious and moral people, "You are as alienated from God's heart as this young man is from his father's heart."

You can be near God, but far from him.

We have to realize what Jesus is saying here. It's not the only place he says this. He says it continually.

John 14:9, Philip says something silly, and Jesus says, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?"

Matthew 7:22, where Jesus says, "On the last day people will come to me and say, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we do mighty deeds in your name? Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we do miracles in your name?' " Jesus will say, "I never knew you."

Isaiah 29:13, "And the Lord said: "This people draws near with their mouth and honors me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men..."

You can be close, but lost.

You can be involved with the father's issues, involved with the father's affairs, involved with the father's business, involved with the father's orders, and not be involved with the father, because when it comes right down to it, the elder brother can't even fathom how the father is operating. *He doesn't understand what the father is doing.*

One is really lost

It doesn't just say the elder brother is *as* lost as the younger brother. This story is actually telling us the elder brother is *more* lost than the younger brother.

At the end of the story, only one of the Brothers is reunited with his father; and it's not the elder.

Not in spite of, but because of.

What Jesus Christ is getting across here is not just that the elder son is lost in **spite** of his goodness. What Jesus is getting across here is the elder son is lost **because** of his goodness.

The climax - "I've slaved for you!"

When the father came to invite the older brother in, "**Look you, All these years I've served you, I've never disobeyed a word you said. And *this* son gets the fatted calf...**"

Your goodness can drive you further from god than your badness.

Self righteousness blinds you.

We all know when we're unrighteous. We all know who the "younger brothers are." Where are they today? Hung over. Sleeping in.

What about the older brothers? The self righteous? They're right **here**.

Self Righteousness as a sickness

Cancer, heart disease are sneaky. But they kill you.

For years, I was a pharisee. I am the older brother.

I worked for god. I slaved for him. I worked hard, I was a perfectionist, I preached.

Why? - Not because of a love for Jesus. **Fear and pride.**

Remember, sin is slavery. I was a slave. My heart was jury rigged to good deeds.

This parable was a wake up call to me it changed my life. (And my teaching.)

Reading too much into this?

I don't think so. Because the Bible does a great job explaining itself. We happen to have a letter from a former Pharisee explaining this same thing.

Both can be saved.

One of those Pharisees who heard Jesus, who heard the radical warnings about self-righteousness, he understood. And he *hated* it.

Just like the father came out to the older brother, Jesus came down to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. But this pharisee listened.

What did he say about it?

Galatians 5:4

“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace.”

He lived it. He severed himself from God by his righteousness. And after he came to Christ he looked back at his righteousness and said I count it all but rubbish. (Philippians 3)

Grace is free.

Stop working for it.

- Favor is free
- blessings are free
- love is free

Stop trying to earn it. Stop trying to pay penance.

Sitting here

Maybe you're like me. Like Paul, like the older brother. Maybe you've worked and worked and still can't seem to get that blessing.

You need to stop working, and start seeking.

Relationships aren't about work. They're about seeking. (I'm still figuring this out.)
The doing comes later.

*Lay your deadly doing down
Down at Jesus' feet
Rest in him and him alone
Gloriously complete*