

Good morning. It is good to worship our God with you this morning.

[Thank you]

Before we begin, I would like to thank pastor Choi for his invitation to give the sermon this morning. It is a privilege to preach God's word here at FCBC this morning.

I also want to thank you. While Monica and I have been away for a while, this is still my spiritual home. This is the place where I grew up. This is the place where I first heard the gospel. This is the place where I first made the commitment to become a Christian. The very baptismal behind me, was where I was baptized. This is my spiritual home also because many of you have been my spiritual mentors, Sunday school teachers, and youth counselors. Many of you sent us out and supported us as missionaries to the university campus to minister to college students. Thank you for laying a solid Christian foundation in my life. Thank you for being my spiritual home.

As we receive God's Word together, would you open your bible with me to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15?

[Prayer of illumination]

Let us go to the Lord in prayer together:

“Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word to us. We know that your Word is living, active, and present, speaking to the very depths of our souls even now. We also know that your word reveal to us who You are. So, please Lord, help us to know more of your character and your purposes for our lives and the world this morning. We pray that you would make our hearts and minds, soft, fertile grounds, so that the Word might take roots and begin to transform our lives, from the inside out. This morning, we pray with the Psalmist: “May the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.”

[Introduction]

In the past month or so, I have been traveling a lot. From Vancouver to Seattle. From Seattle to Memphis. From Memphis to Atlanta. From Atlanta to the Gulf Coast, from the coast back to Memphis. From Memphis to Dallas and back. In all of these travels, I noticed that there was one thing I absolutely could not have lived without. Not the comfort of a familiar bed. Not even the comfort of familiar food.

In all my travels, the one thing I could not have lived with out is, Google maps. Without it, I could not have traveled to any of these places. The first thing that I do when I get into the car is to enter my destination into Google maps. When I am driving, I am like a robot that follows it's every word. Turn left in 1 mile. Make a sharp right turn.

Have you ever experienced where your GPS did not work or gave you the wrong directions? When that happens, you feel helpless, you feel frustrated, you feel lost. Without a map or GPS, there is no way to get to the destination.

In life, many people are going day after day without a map or GPS. Many are wandering aimlessly. Many do not know where their destination is. Many are lost.

Some are wondering - “What is my purpose here on earth?”
Others are wondering - “What career path should I choose?”
Even others are wondering - “How do I care for my family, lead and disciple my children?”
Finally, some are wondering about God, thinking - “I don’t have it all together, how can God accept me?”

At one time or another in life. All of us feel lost just a bit.

[Big Idea]

Our passage this morning in Luke 15 tells us that - God loves those who are lost.

Now this is the message found in the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and but especially in the parable of the lost son. All of these parables are meant to surprise the listeners by saying: “God loves those who are lost.”

But we have to ask: why does Jesus even tell these parables? Jesus told these parables as a response to the Pharisees’ complain. In verses 1 and 2 we see that the Pharisees and teachers were complaining that Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners.

Luke 15: 1-2 “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

To understand why the Pharisees were so mad, we have to understand that, the tax collectors were consider “traitors” by the Jews because they worked for the Roman Empire. And sinners were often the “rejects” of society because they were considered unworthy or unclean. In that culture, you only eat or fellowship with who you want to have relationships with.

This is probably not hard to imagine for us – because who do we want to have lunch or Dim Sum with? People that we want to associate ourselves with right? So Jesus eating, associating with these “sinners,” surprised the Pharisees.

This morning, I want to show you **three** aspects of God’s love toward the lost that surprises us.

FIRST: God’s love surprises us because it reaches the worst of worst.

The parable begins with these words in verse 11: “*There was a man who had two sons. 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.*”

In biblical times, the inheritance is not normally distributed until the father dies, and so what did the younger’s son actions mean? A biblical scholar says: “the younger son is impatient for his father’s death.”¹ The younger son’s request was truly outrageous.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal; the 15th Chapter of Luke, Seen through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1973), 40.

Many of us comes from a culture that deeply value respecting and honoring your parents. We could never in a million years, tell our moms and dad, “Hey I can’t wait any longer, give me what’s coming to me now!” In Chinese culture, we can imagine that if we dare say this, “Hey mom and dad, give me my share!” The answer will not be “ok son, ok daughter, here is your share.” It will be “ok son, wait here for a bit, wait for the tong tai (Chicken feather duster)!”

When you and I are reading this, we say this is a really bad son! But it goes from bad to worst. Verse 13 tells us that the younger son “*gathered together all he had.*” The same scholar says that literally means that the younger son cashed in. This is an extra insult to the father. Not only has the younger son asked for the inheritance but he has “liquidated” all of it.² You can imagine, when the younger son was selling off his father’s things, the villagers would have noticed. This would have brought great dishonor and shame to the whole family.

You know how the rest of the story goes. The younger son ran away to a foreign land, wasted all his money, a famine happened, so he hired himself to a Gentile, who sent him to feed pigs. He was so hungry that he even wanted to eat what the pigs were eating. Now pigs were considered unclean by the Jews, so a job feeding pigs were certainly be repulsive and unfathomable to those who were listening to the parable.³

The younger son has gone from bad to worst, from bad to ultimately completely lost. No family, no home, no country, no food, hanging on for his dear life.

At this point of the story, you can imagine that the Pharisees must have thought: “Ha! just like I thought, sinners always get what they deserve! Just like the younger son that threw away everything, and now he is starving to death. These sinners around Jesus do not deserve to be treated any better! Jesus should not be eating with them!”

When we see people who are living a sinful lifestyle, what do we think? I wonder, do some of us tend to think like the Pharisees?

But God’s love reaches even the worst of worst. Even when everyone thinks that this younger son deserves every bit of what’s coming to him. Even when everyone thinks that this younger son is beyond hope. Even then, he is not beyond God’s love.

[Illustration] Many of us know by heart the hymn “Amazing Grace.” But did you know that the hymn was written by a man named John Newton? Did you know that John Newton, at one point of his life, was a captain of a ship that transported African slaves? Many would say that a person so vile, that would be in the business of treating human beings as commodities, is beyond God’s love. But John was not beyond God’s love. God’s love reaches the worst of worst, and the lowest of low. On one stormy day at sea, John gave his life over to God. Years after his conversion and having become a minister, John wrote these famous words: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like! I once was lost, but now I am found. Was blind but now I see.”

² Ibid., 42.

³ Tyndale New Testament commentaries

The love of God is still searching this morning. It's searching for the person who thinks that he or she is beyond hope. It's searching for the person who has tried everything else to find the way but could not. It's searching for the person that is hanging on to dear life. Are you that person this morning?

Not only does God's love surprises us because it reaches the worst of worst...

SECOND: God's love [also] surprises us because He forgives completely and restores fully.

Back to the parable, verse 17 and 18 tells us that the younger son realized that he was completely lost. He realized that he had sinned against God and his father. He realized that he needed to go back home. But how could he go back after all he had done?

So he prepared a speech: "Dad. I messed up. I sinned. I am not worthy to be your son anymore. Please, just let me come home and be one of your servants." You can imagine that the younger son rehearsed this speech over and over again in his head as he took the long walk home.

Here, we must take a pause and notice something important. Verse 17 says that the younger son "came to his sense" (NIV) or "came to himself" (ESV). There was in him a realization that he is in fact a sinner in need of forgiveness.

Repentance comes before homecoming. In order for the younger son to go home, he has to first realize that he is lost.

Here lies one of the greatest barriers for the lost to be found. Some will not go to God because they refuse to see the reality of their own lostness. Some will not go to God because they refuse to come to terms of their own sin. Some will not go to God because they rather stave but control their own destiny than to give God total control.

This story takes the greatest turn, when the younger son realized his own lostness. He repented and got up to go back home. God might be asking some of you this morning - "Do you realize that you are lost? Will you repent and come home?"

So the younger son began the long journey home. Now all of the people listening to Jesus would be at the edge of their seat - "What is the father going to do?" "How is he going to response?" "What sort of punishment will the younger son have to endure?"

The listeners would have never imaged in a million years what happened next. What Jesus said next must have surprised them. Pay attention to this one verse.

Luke 15:20 "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 and kissed him."

Long way off – this is the same word used when it described how the younger son ran off to a far away country. yes, the son ran far, but the father also came far to meet him.

Felt compassion – A word that means a feeling of pity, sympathy. But really it is a word that describes a feeling that comes from the gut, and it encompasses the whole body. The father’s whole being was filled with compassion when he saw his son.

Ran to his son – The cultural context is that - Middle Eastern man, especially man of honor do not run. For the father to have run, he would have to literally lift up his outer cloak, revealing his legs to run. This would have been an outrageous, humiliating action.⁴ But the father did not care, his lost son has come home!

Embrace – literally to fall upon the neck. You can imagine the scene, when the finally reach each other. No words were necessary. The father’s embrace fell upon his son.

The son begins to say the speech that he has been rehearsing. “Dad. I messed up. I sinned. I am not worthy to be your son anymore.” But the father, cuts him off before he gets to the next part. Instead the father restores the son back to his previous status in the family. The robe, ring, sandals – each of these signifies honor, authority, and sonship.

All of the father’s actions say: “Son, you are forgiven. You are restored.”

Now to those who were listening to the parable. You can imagine the silence in the room. The Pharisees and sinners could not believe what they just heard. The father had response to the younger son surprised everyone.

Everyone would have expected a scolding from the father when the younger son gets home. Everyone would have expected that the younger son would have to pay his dues back to the family.

No one expected that the father would just forgive the son. No one expected the father would restore the son, back to the family.

[Illustration]

Many of you know that Monica and I have a son named Josiah. Josiah is at an age now where he is very playful. He loves to play hide and seek. Sometimes at the wrong places. We were at a store one time, and he decides that this is the perfect place to play hide and seek. So he runs off before I could even say “no”. Now, I was angry for the first minute that I could not find him. Then quickly, I became worry when I really could not as the time passed. 2 minutes past by, I still could not find him, I start to get frantic. I yell out, “Josiah, where are you?” I quicken my pace up and down each isle, hoping that I would see him in the next isle. For the moment, my son was lost. And all that I want was for him to be found. All that I want was to hold and hug my son and know that he is ok.

If this is how an earthly father feels about a lost son. How much more our heavenly father feels toward those who are lost?

⁴ Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal; the 15th Chapter of Luke, Seen through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, 67.

God is standing at the far end waiting, looking, searching, for the son who has left and lost. When you run to God, an embrace is waiting. Forgiveness is waiting. Jesus is saying to you and I this morning: “Whatever you have done that made you far away from you. You are never too far. I am here waiting for you to return.”

You know, so many people see God more like a school master than a loving father. They believe that God is more like a school master, with a report card in his hand, who at every turn is keeping a record of all their wrongs and mistakes. In the end, he will say “Not good enough. Fail.”

But this parable tells us that, God is not like a school master who is ready to tell us “not good enough” at every moment. This parable tells us that compassion, not punishment was the attitude of the God toward a repented sinner. Joy, not anger was the attitude of the God toward a repented sinner. This parable tells us that God is like a compassionate father that endured the dishonor and bore the shame **himself** so that the younger son can return home. God himself, in Jesus Christ, on the cross, endured the dishonor, took our guilt on himself, so that we can return home and receive forgiveness.

God’s love surprises us because it reaches to the worst of worst.

God’s love surprises us because it forgives completely and restores fully.

THIRD: God’s love surprises us because he asks us to follow Him in the search for the lost.

Now at this point, we think that the story is finished. It is a good ending. The lost is now found, the sinner now repents and returns to God, a party is waiting. But the parable does not end here.

As the story continues in verse 25. We began to see that there is not just one lost son, but two.⁵ The passage tells us that when the older son hears the party, he is surprised. He asks one of the servants, “What’s going on?” The servant tells him that his younger brother has come home. And your father has welcomed him back by throwing a party!

In verse 29, it tells us that the older son refuses to go in and says this to the father. “*Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.*”

You see, even though the older son had been obedient and dutiful, he did not have a relationship with the father. His relationship with the father was filled with resentment. He saw himself as a slave, not a son. You see, the older son, in a way, is also lost.

The older son in this story is the Pharisees. They might have followed the law from the greatest to the least. But they did not do it out of love and relationship but as only obligations. They might have been busy with their religious work, but their work made them think that they are better than other people. Their work made them think that God owes them. Jesus tells the Pharisees that even though they think they are close to God but in fact, they are also lost.

Jesus tells this parable because he wants the Pharisees to understand God’s love for the lost. He wants the Pharisees to have the same attitude as God does for the lost. He wants them to

⁵ Nouwen vividly describes this deeper, more subtle “lostness” of the older son in Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image, 1995), 69–71.

understand that God's love reaches the worst of the worst. He wants them to understand that God's love forgives and restores those who repent. And He wants them also to join him in searching and welcoming back the lost.

The parable does not have an ending. The question remains. What will the older son do? Will he stay outside or go inside to celebrate the return of his lost brother?

In this same way, the parable is in fact asking us a question. How will we respond? If God loves the lost, will we also have the same attitude? Will we also search out those who are lost?

Brothers and sisters, a church will never truly grow if we do not have the same attitude toward the lost as God does. We must pray that God will give us his heart for the lost. We must share God's heart for the lost. We must change our attitude toward the lost. We must go and search for the lost. We must do this with those who we encounter: our neighbors, our co-workers, our classmates, and our families.

[Illustration]

In one for the last paper that I wrote while at seminary. It was on the Baptist missionary, William Carey. Here is a painting of him baptizing a man in the Ganges river in India. Carey is considered by many as the "father of modern missions." He was one of the first to establish missionaries societies. In one sermon to motivate his fellow minister to establish an oversea mission to India, Carey said: "Expect God things from God. Attempt great things for God." With these words and a burning passion to see the lost be found, Carey ventured to a foreign land with his family, sister in law and a missionary doctor. In the course of his lifetime, Carey and his missionary companions proclaimed the gospel, translated the Scripture, cared for the sick. Carey understood that eternity is at stake for the lost. He willingly gave up his life to search for the lost in India.

Will we expect great things from God when we search for the lost? Will we attempt great things for God in our search for the lost? Or will we be a church like the older brother, who has a harden attitude toward the lost?⁶

May we be bold to pray for our coworkers and classmates who are lost with renewed fervor this week. May we be bold to share with our family about how God has changed our lives this week. May we be bold to invite our friends to next week's church wider evangelistic meeting. By God's grace and the power of His Spirit, may we be a church that is like the Father.

[Prayer to end]

⁶ NAC asks this question more directly: "Will we be the church of the elder brother or the church of the loving father?"

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