

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN



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“Sweet and Sour Grace”

Luke 15

Dr. George C. Anderson

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So he told them this parable: 4 “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

8 “Or what woman having ten silver coins, † if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

11 Then Jesus † said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with † the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands.”’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then 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 slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best

one –and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father † said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

So ends the reading of one of the most beloved chapters in the Bible; three parables glowing with grace, all having to do with something lost, then found. It has been said that the Gospel itself is fully told in the last parable commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This beloved parable has given comfort and hope to countless individuals who came to the end of their resources and realized they had no hope except in God’s grace. For most of its reading, the sky of this chapter is bright with God’s love and mercy. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

Yet, darker clouds bracket the parables of chapter 15. The chapter begins with tension and ends with criticism. Jesus tells these parables in response to Pharisees and scribes who “have issues” with the company Jesus keeps. In telling the parables, Jesus is answering their criticism with his own. They are the older brother, pouting because God is gracious to those they condemn. While the parables may comfort individuals today, their telling increases the tension between Jesus and religious authorities and fuels the growing conflict between them. If the Gospel is, “We are saved by grace,” let the hearer be warned that this very Gospel creates conflict and division. “Amazing grace, how *sour* the sound, that saved a wretch like *him*.”

Let’s go back to the first two verses that set the stage. Some Pharisees and scribes are unhappy with Jesus and the company he keeps. Specifically, the problem is table fellowship for Jesus not only has an audience with the despised but also breaks bread with them. Table fellowship is taken seriously as a sign of friendship and intimacy.

And who are these dinner guests to whom the Pharisees and scribes object? They are tax collectors who are considered corrupt extortionists in collaboration with the Romans. Their extortion of money is a particular affront to Pharisees who have day jobs in business and don’t like paying unjust taxes. And Jesus is eating with “sinners,” an official designation of those whose violations of Mosaic Law have been so grievous that they have been “excluded from the synagogue.”¹ The scribes and Pharisees would not have a problem with Jesus preaching to the tax collectors and sinners, letting them know of their shameful sins, and calling them to submit to the steps necessary for restoration. They do have a problem with Jesus breaking bread with

¹ Craddock, Fred, Luke, Interpretation Series, p. 77.

them, treating them as friends, and giving them a place at his table as if they were acceptable in good, Jewish, company.

Jesus knows they are upset and tells these three parables of joy as a response. They are parables of joy because they all speak of something precious that is lost, but then is found, and the celebration that follows. That they are parables of joy infuriates the Pharisees and scribes even more and increases the growing conflict between them and Jesus. I'll explain.

The first two parables are almost harmless. Who could have a problem with a sheep that has been brought back safely into the herd and a woman who finds a coin. Perhaps the shepherd took a risk in leaving the 99 to seek out the lost one, but "all's well that ends well." Perhaps the woman should have realized that "time is money" and all that effort to recover a drachma, worth a denarius (or a day's wages),² may not have been worth the search for one lost coin (although my Scottish Presbyterian upbringing certainly understands the woman's actions) but her ending up with all 10 coins is no scandal.

Jesus uses these two parables as a set-up. He is using the rhetorical device of "a series of three" where the first two events set up the third. You know how this works: "And the third pig built his house of brick." "And the third time the boy cried wolf, no one believed him." "And then the big Billy Goat crossed the bridge." The first two parables set up the theme of lost and found, but the third makes clear that what Jesus is really talking about are the sinners and tax collectors Jesus is welcoming into his company.

The only strange thing that stands out about these two parables are the celebrations. Why the parties? A shepherd retrieves a stray sheep and he wants to throw a party. Does he kill the fatted calf? I wouldn't be surprised if the woman spends more money than the single drachma is worth. But Jesus says that there is a celebration in heaven just like that when one measly sinner repents. In fact, there is *more* joy over the sheep that strayed and was returned than over the 99 who dutifully stayed under the shepherd's watch.

We will learn in the third parable that the issue is not whether the shepherd or woman should have thrown their parties, but whether their neighbors and friends will show up. "Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy."³ The assumption is that the Pharisees and scribes are the 99 who are obediently where they belong. Yet, if they do not join in God's celebration, their membership in the 99 could be called into question.

The issue is brought to a head in the telling of the third parable, the climatic one. A Father had two sons and loses one of them. A sheep strayed, a coin was dropped, but this is a morally responsible adult who misbehaves. The younger son demands his inheritance early, a demand "both disrespectful and irregular."⁴ He then goes into the far country – Gentile country – unclean country – and squanders his inheritance in "loose living."⁵ Some seed is spilled in unclean places and money spent in ways that Calvin would call "conspicuous consumption."

² Culpepper, R. Alan, Luke, John, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, p. 296.

³ Culpepper, p. 298.

⁴ Culpepper, p. 301.

⁵ Except for the older son's later accusation of devouring property with prostitutes, it is up to our imagination as to what "loose living" means. Ephesians 5:18 suggests drunkenness, Titus 1:6 suggests rebelliousness and I Peter 4:3 suggests licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, reveling, carousing and lawless idolatry."⁵

The parable does tell of a shameful descent: the younger son goes first into the far country, Gentile country; then engages in lawless behavior; and finally becomes completely unclean by spiritually becoming pork itself, competing with swine for the pods they eat. Those pods are eaten by humans only in times of famine and thus show the extremity of his need.⁶ No longer is he a Jew, he is “a swine” – a Gentile. He is as bad as the extortionists and excommunicated sinners with whom Jesus is having dinner and deserves every bit of misery he endures.

But this is a parable of *grace*, not *judgment*. Grace makes possible the boy’s repentance, which is seen in three stages. First, he comes to himself, seeing himself as he truly is and accepts the consequences of his bad decisions. He remembers his father. Joachim Jeremiah says “repentance is learning to say ‘Abba’ again.” He remembers his father and realizes he is worse off than his father’s servants. He does not deserve to be received as a son, but maybe he will be taken on as a servant.

Second, he arises. That is, he moves beyond shame to positive action. He takes a step in a new direction. Being sorry is a first step but is pathetic as an only step. For those who are smart enough to realize they need help but not brave enough to ask for help, he shows them a better way. It is good he realizes that he has lowered himself to pig-level, but it’s also good that he gets up.

And third, he goes to his father. He believes restoration and redemption will come only with the one whose graciousness he abused. The very love he abused is the love that may heal him.

Most sermons concentrate on the younger son as if he is the main character in this parable. However, remembering that Jesus is responding to the Pharisees and scribes, the key figures in this parable are the Father and the older brother. What Jesus is saying about the Father will be a scandal to the scribes and Pharisees, and what he says about the older brother will be an affront.

First, the father is obviously the God-figure. While the scribes and Pharisees object to Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus says that this Father *wants* the sinful son to return, *looks* for it and *delights* in it. In ancient Palestine, it was regarded as unbecoming, undignified, for a grown man to run.⁷ This Father has every right to wait for the son to come to him, to prostrate himself before him begging his forgiveness, and then following the precedent of the Law that the Pharisees know so well in setting conditions for his restoration. Yet this father runs to the son, kisses him expressing his forgiveness even before hearing the confession, and interrupts the son’s prepared speech to give instructions for a celebration. This is a picture of sheer grace.⁸ Obviously the Father loved the son even when the son was in the far country. This celebration goes beyond simple table fellowship for the fatted calf is to be served and the son is to wear the robe and ring of a member of the household.

⁶ The carob pods were the “locusts” eaten by John the Baptist, which is why they have been known as “St. John’s bread.” This explains why John’s diet gets special mention: “Can you believe it? John, a man of God, ate “locusts.”

⁷ Culpepper, p. 302.

⁸ Culpepper, p. 305.

Second, the older son is obviously the stand-in for the scribes and Pharisees. Like the older brother, they are supposedly the ones who are where they belong – the 99 sheep, the 9 coins – so what Jesus says about the elder, he says about them.

In the figure of the older son, Jesus describes a man who is known by two relationships: he is a son and a brother. It is the latter relationship that the son wants to deny. He refuses to see as his brother one whom his father calls a son. “This son of yours,” he tells his father, “has devoured your property with prostitutes!” The elder bases family life on merit, not grace, and thus will not join the celebration.⁹ The Father, though, insists on the logic of relationships: “this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Here is the key: Ironically, the son who stayed home ends up being the one *who is not where he belongs*. Earlier I said that the Pharisees and scribes would consider themselves as the 99 sheep. But there is a party going on inside the house and their stand-in, the elder son, is staying outside. By so doing, the older son is disobeying his father’s wishes.

- Could it be that the elder is now the stray sheep, the lost coin, the disobedient son?
- Could it be that the scribes and Pharisees are the ones who are disobeying God the Father?
- Could it be that the scribes and Pharisees are the ones who need to come to themselves, arise and go to the Father?
- Do they need the humility to recognize that God is throwing a party for sinners and they are invited, but to join in means celebrating with some people *they would like to see written out of God’s will?*

The Pharisees and scribes know the answer to these questions and it only further sours the relationship between them and Jesus. The net result of Jesus telling these parables of joy is that the conflict grows that eventually leads to the cross. “What’s So Amazing About Grace?” Philip Yancey asks with the title of his wonderful book. One of the things so amazing is that this incredible gift of God is seen as something scandalous and unacceptable by some of God’s people.

The shame is that what the older son of the parable doesn’t remember is that the Father not only has two sons but *loves* two sons. He *goes out* to both. He goes out to meet his younger son upon his return and he goes out to his elder son to encourage him to come in and join the party. The son is denying himself the enjoyment of his Father’s love and grace. When we resent how someone else is loved and accepted, it is hard to feel loved and accepted ourselves. When we think in terms of what we earn and deserve, the only thing harder than understanding why *someone else* is saved by God’s grace is why *we* are saved by that same grace.

So, given those with whom Jesus is arguing, the parables make us aware of two difficulties of understanding and embracing the grace of God. The first difficulty is that those we condemn are still beloved by God and are welcome to return home. The second difficulty is realizing that we are welcome to return home. Until we have the humility to accept the reality of both truths, the sweet reality of grace will seem sour, and God will be opposed instead of praised. May it be with us here that God is praised!

⁹ Culpepper, p. 305. The older brother will not accept “grace as the Father’s rule for life in the family...”