The Lost Son

In the summer series: More Parables of Jesus

# Scripture: Luke 15:11-24

# Key Thought: Only when we realize our glass is empty do we return to our Father.

Long version: When we think we have all we need, we do not return to God; but when we come to the end of our own resources, then there is an opportunity for us to come to our senses and return to our Father.

# Intro:

Two weeks ago, we talked about the first two parables in Luke chapter 15. We discovered that all three parables in this chapter have the same plot. Something is lost and then found and then there is a celebration. We’ve already noted Jesus' key point to the Pharisees. He wants them to understand that they should be rejoicing when Jesus seeks lost people, rather than criticizing. They need to know that heaven celebrates every lost sinner who is found.

Now it is good to note that Jesus is always teaching and reaching at least three different groups of hearers during his ministry.

* One group was his disciples who, like us, Jesus wanted to learn to reflect God's perspective, to have a truly loving attitude, and to learn how to minister to others.
* Another group was the Pharisees who had a form of religion but who looked down on the moral wanderers and opposed Jesus at every turn.
* And the third group were the common lot of lost people, those who needed to be guided back on the path to God, those who often hungered for God amid the daily struggles of life.

In this third parable of the chapter, Jesus creates a character to represent each of the latter two groups. The parable has three characters - The Father who represents God himself, a younger son who lost his way, and is commonly known as the prodigal son, and a third character, the elder brother. This is one of the most powerful parables that Jesus told. Indeed, there are so many points of correspondence between the characters and the intended meaning that it might even be called an allegory.

The parable’s short drama contains within it a key vignette from the spiritual biography of each of the two groups that Jesus was speaking about. Each biography sketch is so rich in spiritual lessons for us that I have chosen to spend one Sunday on each one. Today we will talk about the younger brother and his story and what we can learn from it. This story is a favorite among pastors and is talked about often, probably because we need to hear its message often. In two weeks, we will talk about the story of the elder brother. This brother in the story who is seldom mentioned, but he represents a key part of Jesus' message to the Pharisees and to us. The week in between is communion Sunday, on which I will speak about the parable of the old and new wine.

Now let's turn our attention to the familiar story of the prodigal son, the son who took his share of his inheritance early and then went into another country and spent his inheritance in wild and immoral living.

# Full glass

I would like to illustrate first with this full glass of water. Now if you are in a restaurant and the waiter comes around offering to fill your glass and your glass is already full what will you say? You will refuse of course. You do not need a refill. You may also refuse if you are just not thirsty, whether your glass is full or not, simply because your body tells you you’ve had enough water.

Now let's look at the young man in the parable . The young man went away with a full wallet. He did not think he needed anything. He thought he knew most everything. In his mind, figuratively speaking, his glass was definitely full. At that point he thought life was great. He was riding high as we say. The farthest thing from his mind was returning to his Father.

Spiritually speaking this kind of smug self-satisfied attitude is dangerous. The Bible has quite a bit to say in the book of Proverbs about the kind of attitude that the young man had. Here are a couple examples.

The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice. Pr 12:15 NIV

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.   
Pr 26:12 NIV

Why is the Bible's verdict so gloomy? Because when we think we know it all, when we think our glass is full, then we do not look for God’s help and we are not willing to accept it even when if it is offered.

# Empty glass

Of course, the story did not end up well for the younger son. Like many who get rich quick, he did not spend his money wisely and was morally undisciplined as well. After his money was gone, He apparently found himself talking any job he could get just to eat. In his case he ended up working feeding pigs, not a nice job for a good Jewish boy. In addition, we learn from the story that he is hungry enough to eat the pig food. Only then does he “come to his senses.” Literally the phrase is “when he came to himself.” Only then does he realize that in more ways than one, his glass is empty. Not only is his pocketbook empty and his stomach empty but his spirit is empty too.

But then he remembers his Father's household. In his Father’s house there is plenty – plenty of food, plenty of care – even for servants.

On the other side here, I have an empty glass -- or it could've been a nearly empty glass. Now let's say you've been drinking lemonade on the beach and your mom comes by with the pitcher and notices that your class is almost empty and says, “Would you like more lemonade? What are you going to say? This time you're going to say, “yes!” quickly; and be very glad for more lemonade.

The difference is easy. Your glass was empty! Besides that, you are in the sun and your body is telling you that you need more things to drink. You were aware of your need.

Now let's go back to the young man in the parable that Jesus told. After he had spent all this money and had been hired by the local pig farmer to feed pigs, the Bible tells us that he was hungry. In one translation it says that he said to himself, “I'm about to starve.” He had a definite need. Now the situation was different. His need was obvious. His pride was taken away. He was ready to receive help.

# Coming to our senses

Then the stage was set for the last thing that is needed. The Bible says he came to his senses. How could we say this in other ways? We could say he had been clueless but now he gets it. He finally realizes what the real situation is. He’s starving while the servants at home in his father's house are eating very well. They have more than enough every day. Coming to his senses meant more than that he recognized the situation. It also meant that he recognized the big mistake that he had made. Now he needed to change. He needed to acknowledge to his father what a fool he had been. I say that’s some good hog pen thinking.

Many times, people get themselves into the hog pen in life, reaping the unpleasant consequences of what they have done. But their hog pen thinking is not nearly as healthy as this young man’s. Some consider their troubles inevitable and just keep going in the same unhealthy directions in life. Predictably things do not get any better for them either. Others blame other people or circumstances for their troubles. It’s anybody’s or anything’s fault besides their own. They take no responsibility for getting where they are and take no responsibility for making things better. Predictably things get worse. Many other people, faced with the depressing results of bad decisions, try to forget their troubles with chemical dependence or a whirlwind of activity. Neither works. Both are simply escapes. But this young man in the story that Jesus told avoided all these errors. His was healthy hog pen thinking. He took responsibility for his decisions, and he decided to repent, to admit to his Father straight up what a fool he had been and to humbly submit again to his Father, even as a servant in the household, just to be home again.

The Bible tells us that he left the pigpen. He returned to his father. He confessed his foolish mistakes. He humbled himself and asked to be taken back as a servant in his father's household.

## Now about you and me

All of us end up in the hog pen spiritually at sometime times in our lives, I think. On some occasions it is much more serious than others. But we all know what it is like to decide that we want to go our own way, live on the wild side or the world’s side and try to forget the Father’s house. There is enough of a Spirit of rebellion in all of us that we understand this parable all too well.

For too long, we are not willing to recognize when our glass is empty. We are in denial that we would be much better off returning to our heavenly Father. So often we are still filled with ourselves, still satisfied with the trinkets of momentary pleasures, still occupied in the frantic scramble of everyday life. We are blind to our own spiritual needs.

Other times we recognize we have needs but we do not turn to the right place, we do not come to our spiritual senses. We are too proud to turn back and acknowledge our mistakes.

The Bible calls this turning back to our Father -- confession and repentance. But often we are not willing to change our ways. So, we’re stuck starving in the pigpen where we are when those in our father's house are faring so much better.

If only we would get up and return to our Father!

Some of you can identify with the hog pen location of the prodigal this morning. Even as I speak, you are quite aware of the things of your Father’s House, the things of God that you are missing out on—a sense of peace, of forgiveness, of joy, of community, of purpose in life for example. You may even be painfully aware that the distance between you and your heavenly Father is there because of some decisions you have made.

I ask you gently. What kind of hog pen thinking do you have? Is it the good and healthy kind of the lost son in the story? He said,

I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. Luke 15:18 ESV

My friend, if it is, you have a much brighter future!

# The Father's reaction

## The surprise point

Those who study this parable tell us that one of its key messages is found in the reaction of the father to the wayward son’s return. What do you think was the son’s chief concern as he headed home? It was how he would be received. If you are returning to your heavenly Father, you want to know what his reaction will be too. As far as Jesus’ audience is concerned, the father’s reaction is one of the biggest surprises in the parable. From a human standpoint we might expect the father to be a quite reticent, at least hesitant or tentative, not knowing quite what to do. After all the little rascal has taken one third of the family fortune away and wasted it. He has rejected the family and hasn’t been heard from in who knows how long.

But the picture of the father in the parable is surprising. Instead of being hesitant, Jesus pictures the father as longing for the son. This loving parent noticed the boy returning while he was still a long way away, before anyone else noticed. His reaction is over-the-top joy. He ran towards him. He hugged and kissed him. He had him immediately clothed appropriately as a son with a ring and a robe and sandals. Then he orders the fattened calf killed for a great and joyful household celebration. He did not make him a servant as the repentant son had asked but welcomed him back as a son.

## Confirming the main point of the chapter

We need to see first, that this reaction of the Father in the parable once again confirms and emphasizes the main point that Jesus is making in this series of three Parables. The Father in heaven celebrates when one sinner repents. Jesus really wanted the Pharisees and his disciples to get this point. That is why he repeated it three times. The shepherd in the first parable celebrates the finding of the lost sheep. The women in the second parable celebrates the finding of the lost coin. Here the Father celebrates the return of the lost son.

## Message to the lost son

But remember who else is listening to this story. It is the third group of listeners that I mentioned; those common people who were being put down by the Pharisees, who felt that they could never really be accepted by God. They are the lost ones whom the Pharisees disdained but whom Jesus desires to comfort. What is the message for them? Remember that the father in the parable stands for our heavenly Father. It is He who rejoices over one lost one who repents. It is He who sent his only Son to “seek and to save” those who are lost! It is to these lost ones that Jesus is giving hope and comfort. They can be accepted by God too. All that is needed is repentance and return to the Father.

# Conclusion

## Message to us today

Jesus’ message is still just as comforting today! Jesus is communicating that our Father will come to us with arms open wide just as the Father in the parable. He will enfold us in his love. He will forgive us and help us to get a new start as a part of his family. As soon as we will recognize that our glass is empty; as soon as we will “come to our senses;” as soon as we will remember what blessings are in store for us in our Father’s care; as soon as we will admit our folly and “arise and return to our Father;” we too will be welcomed with open arms by our loving Father who even now watches for us to come.

Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. Rev 22:17 NIV