

26. Lessons for saints about sinners

January 6, 2008

Who hasn't heard the story of "The Prodigal Son"? The son who left his father for worldly and carnal living with his daddy's inheritance in a far country came to his sense and came back to his daddy. The daddy embraces the son. It finishes with a warm fuzzy happy ending. Or does it?

It has a lot more than a simple nice and heart warming story. Of course, it has been used by many people in evangelism. And rightly so. But the story of the Prodigal Son is not complete without studying the older son, because he may not have left home physically, but his heart was far from the love for his father.

Therefore the real reason for the three parables in this chapter is in the first three verses. Jesus saw the Pharisees and scribes' stuck-up attitude toward the lowly and sinners and wanted them to know the heart of God.

What about us? Do we have a heart for lost souls? A few times, I was told by the people who were not happy with the way I finish the sermons – with an invitation to Christ. One of them wrote me a letter, "I know I am saved. Why do you keep on talking about salvation?" Don't look around, because he is no longer with us. I took him out to the desert. Just kidding. Some people cannot fathom that we still have to reach out for other lost souls. Their idea is, "Let's get comfortable, let's have a nice building and nice chairs."

I will tell you a story:

In early 20th century, merchant ships did not have good radar systems, let alone satellite GPS systems like now. So it was not uncommon for ships to shipwreck themselves on shallow rocky areas around Cape Cod, MA.

A group of good hearted local people set up a rescue station on one rocky area with a small shed where the ocean water soaked sailors from the destroyed ship could warm themselves up after being rescued. Within a year, this small rescue station saved hundreds of sailors from the cold Atlantic Ocean water and allowed them to be reunited with their families.

One of Boston Herald Newspaper reporters visited this rescue station and ran a story in the newspaper front page the next day. Soon many other newspapers across America also picked up the story.

The small rescue station was no longer holding a few people. Tourists were coming by, senators and congressmen coming by for photo opps. Some wealthy people formed a governing board for this station and decided that it was not sufficient to do rescue work in that condition, so money was starting to pour in.

Now it became a true local attraction. Souvenir shops were popping up left and right, the wealthy board members decided that the original small shed was an eye sore and needed to be removed. But they kept some rescue items as decorations for the newly built mammoth three story station.

Shipwreck still happened from time to time. The board member came to a conclusion that a bunk house with beds and shower facilities should be built, but away from

the beautiful new rescue station. They didn't want to have some water soaked sailors drench the beautifully waxed hardwood floor and expensive rugs of the rescue station.

Gradually they no longer participated in rescuing the sailors who are shipwrecked at all. The rescue station became a high society people's hang out and a place to go to meet important people.

Another group of good hearted people started to resume their rescue effort for the shipwrecked victims a couple miles down the rocky area. It eventually got famous for its rescue stories and people started to flock around it. And you can tell how it goes.

If a church is no longer interested in helping other people come to Jesus Christ, then it becomes a social club, it is best for that church to be shut down. If you don't have a burning desire for people to come to Christ, you need to have your spiritual head examined. I am sure that you've heard me say this before – what is better than going to heaven? Taking somebody with you.

A. HANG WITH THE LOWLY AND SINNERS

Luke 15:1-3 Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He spoke this parable to them, saying:

When Jesus started His ministry, He chose calloused fishermen and a crooked tax collector for His disciples. While He chastised "good ol' boys' club – Pharisees and scribes" for their hypocrisy, He publicly defended an adulteress. He angrily denounced the priests' pious rules, He rubbed elbows with sinners and tax collectors. Does it mean Jesus endorse their sins? Absolutely not. He despises sins, but He loves sinners.

We, too, need to remember that Jesus chose to humble Himself to hang with the sinners like us. Just because we became born-again Christians, it doesn't mean that we are no longer sinners. We are still sinners who are forgiven by the grace of God and have eternal life in Christ Jesus.

I wouldn't be one bit surprised if the sinners and tax collectors were comfortable to approach Jesus to listen to His messages and repented from their sinful lives. Goodness of God brings repentance, not condemnation.

B. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

Luke 15:4-7 "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? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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 which was lost!' 7 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.

Jesus uses a parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd was willing to go after one lost sheep even though it probably chose to walk away from the Shepherd. Outside the shepherd's protection and the security of the flock, the lost sheep will certainly die. Wild animals will find it easy prey and quickly tear it to pieces.

The Jewish rabbis believed that God would receive a sinner who came to Him the right way. But in the parable of the shepherd and the sheep, Jesus teaches that God actively seeks out the lost. God finds the sinner more than the sinner does find God.

Jesus gives us a rare glimpse of what is happening in heaven when a lost sinner comes to the Lord. What sets off the fireworks in heaven? Ninety-nine legalists completing the ninety-ninth requirement on their Sabbath checklist? The angels don't even yawn for that. But one prostitute weeping at the feet of Jesus or one dying criminal gasping, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom," that's what lights the sky in heaven.

C. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN

Luke 15:8-10 "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? 9 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!' 10 Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This is another parable of the lost sinner. We don't often think of God as rejoicing, but this passage tells us that He does.

In our zeal to speak out against the sin of our culture, do we give the same impression that we hate sinners, too? Do I hate the sin of homosexuality? Yes, but no more than any of my own sins.

There is a group of so-called Christians who cause disgrace to the love of God. They are the members of Westboro Baptist Church, Topeka, Kansas who insist that God is punishing American soldiers for defending a country that harbors homosexuals and they travel across the country and demonstrate at soldiers' funerals. In my opinion, they are the modern day Pharisees and their church is nothing more than a hate group masquerading as a Christian church.

D. THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15:11-24 Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. 12 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. 13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. 14 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. 15 Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine 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 bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."' 20 And he arose and came to his father. 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. 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.' 22 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. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

We all know this "The Parable of the Prodigal Son", but it could also be called "The Parable of the Loving Father," because it emphasizes the graciousness of the father more than the sinfulness of the son. By the way the word 'prodigal' means "wasteful".

When the younger son demanded his share of the father's inheritance, it is like him wishing that his father was dead. Rather than trying to keep and pamper the rebellious son, the wise father allows him to have his way. That is "tough love".

Some of you may have children or someone you love who are following the way of the world. If you continuously bail them out when they are in difficult situations, because you feel bad for them, you are actually getting in the way of our God's discipline. Like this Prodigal Son, they have to hit rock bottom before they look up. It might take a long time before they come to their senses. Some may not at all. God really knows what He is doing and we need to trust Him to do whatever is necessary to get their attention. He doesn't need your counseling to Him nor your interference.

According to the ancient Jewish custom, the oldest son was allowed to have a double portion of the rest of the sons. In this case, the older brother of the Prodigal gets to have two third of the father's wealth and one third will be the Prodigal's share.

Pigs were, of course, considered unclean by Jews, and there could be no more disgusting job than feeding pigs. And think of the smell! One of my KP duties in the Korean Army was taking the left over to the 50 gallon drum cans for pigs. They stunk.

Please note the phrase in v17 – "when he came to himself". Until a lost person comes to realize that he or she needs God, there is nothing anyone can do to help this person. A true repentance is the start of a relationship with Jesus Christ and a restoration.

Normally, ancient Jewish wealthy men were not supposed to run. That is a slave's job, not for a noble man. But this father could care less about what others think about him. His boy is back home. That is all that mattered to him. Can you imagine that the boy saw his father running toward him at full speed and he was thinking, "My dad is so mad and I am so dead."

There is another reason why the father ran to the wayward son. According to the Book of Deuteronomy, this kind of wayward son should be stoned to death. By embracing him, the neighbors would not stone this boy. That is what Jesus did on the cross. He embrace our sins unto Himself, so that we may have life.

The father didn't send off his lost son to a barn to live there and instruct him to display good behaviors for a year, then he would revisit his son's status. The father gave him four things that showed the full restoration – the best robe, a ring on his finger, a pair of sandals on his feet and a feast fit for a king.

E. ANOTHER PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15:25-32 Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the

servants and asked what these things meant. 27 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.' 28 But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 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. 30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 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.'"

The father had another prodigal son in his house. His is a quiet, seething and vengeful anger. In his own way, he is as much a rebel as his younger brother. The proud and the self-righteous always feel that they are not treated as well as they deserve.

His attitude shows that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service. His attitude to his brother is one of utter lack of sympathy. He refers to the prodigal, not as 'my brother' but as 'your son'.

The same father who ran to meet the prodigal came out of the house of feasting to plead with the older son. How gracious and forgiving our Father is, and how patient He is with our weaknesses!

Do you see the unsaved people of your world the same way heaven sees them? Desperately, they search for love and meaning in life, yet everything they cling to becomes sand between their fingers. They are lost. But you can help them get found by Jesus. Tell them about the love of Jesus with humility and love for them. They will respond.

F. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Goodness of God brings repentance, not condemnation.
- 2) It is very easy to speak out against the sin of our culture in our zeal. But we should not have hatred toward the sinners who are not following the Lord. We need to pray for them and show the love of God to them.
- 3) Let's tell the lost people around us about the love of Jesus for them with humility and respect.