

Introduction: Jesus' Jewish audience thought the "Good News" was that the Gentile nations were finally getting what was coming to them. This is reflected in the disciples' question, "Are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6 NIV). The Jews were an oppressed people who lived under the iron hand of Roman tyranny.

The nation of Israel thought that when the Messiah finally came that he would crush all the kingdoms of the earth and take his vengeance out on them. This idea of a revolutionary warrior who would end Roman rule was particularly popular in Jesus' neck of the woods. Galilee, Jesus' home territory, was a nexus for messianic uprisings and a real hotbed for subversive activity to the Roman state.¹

Yet, Jesus surprised them by announcing mercy and forgiveness for outsiders. He is not willing that any should be lost but that all would come to a knowledge of salvation. The Father is patiently waiting for sinners to come home before it's too late, before he closes the door on the unrepentant in an act of final and irreversible judgment.

The news is Good. It's an invitation to come home sinner. Come home to your Father. Surrender to his love, and become his disciple.

Jesus illustrates God's heart for the outsiders in his enduring portrait of God as a father who patiently waits for his rebellious son to return. But instead of giving us a systematic theology on God's fatherly nature, Jesus tells us a story.

Luke 15: 1ff. 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: 4 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that 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 his 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.

There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.

13 Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything (Lk 15:11-16).

A Contemptuous Son

In the story, a young man demands his share of the inheritance and storms off in a huff, blazing his own trail. Once the rebellious son makes it to the big city, he blows through his portion of the estate in fast living. His foolishness leads to poverty, and he finds himself temping for a swine farmer. Pigs were religiously unclean animals to the Jews. So the idea of the young man surviving on leftover pigs gruel would have been particularly abhorrent to Jesus' hearers.

In addition to this offensive vocation, Jesus caricatures the youth as contemptuous of authority. Theirs was a high honor culture. It would have been particularly disrespectful for a Jewish boy to demand his share of the estate from a living parent.² This insolent behavior would have put him in direct violation of Moses' command to honor one's mother and father. Jesus' portrait of the rebellious son has left no margin for his redemption in the Judaism of Jesus' day. The young man is as lost as a man can be.

The flashpoint of change for the prodigal son was that his misery factor exceeded his shame factor. The agony of his poverty became louder than the need to hold on to his pride. Broke and ritually contaminated, the young man has a remarkable epiphany: "Even the hired help on my father's estate live better than this."

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.'" (Lk 15:17-19).

So, the rebellious son moves quickly to return and beg his father to take him back as a mere servant. In the final analysis, demotion is better than starvation (Lk 15:20).

The Ragged Son Returns

When the ragged son finally returns he is met with a surprising reception. Standing at the edge of the property line, the father spots a familiar silhouette on the horizon. The text says that the father, "filled with compassion for him; ran out to meet his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Lk 15:20). In the ancient world, dignified Jewish landowners would rarely run in public. Running in public was considered coarse and unrefined behavior.³

Seeing him from a distance, the once patient father has become an undignified, slobbering mess; He dashes out to embrace his poor but repentant heir. He then calls the servants to put the family ring on his finger and the robe of honor on his back. The celebration that follows is a big, blowout party. In an act of unbelievable mercy, the father reinstates and reclaims his repentant progeny. This stunning reversal illustrates beautifully what it means to surrender. It means to repent. The first step into a life of discipleship is to come our senses about our true condition—we are estranged from the Father. And the second step is like it—we must abandon all hope in our own righteousness by returning home. See the remorse that moves the rebel to action...

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.
(Lk 15:21-24).

In the same way, "coming to our senses" means that we have come to the end of our resources, our excuses, and our pride—we return to the Father and find a robe instead of a reprimand. We are the guests of honor instead of the objects of his eternal contempt.

What's more, this Judge of the world took the initiative to win back lost sons and daughters. He doesn't just talk about love for lost sinners. He sent his Son to bring us back so that we may be reconciled with our Heavenly Father. As reinstated sons, we become disciples of the Son.

Heirs to his Kingdom.

The objects of His pursuit.

- **Fight or Flight?**

I can identify with the father in Jesus' Prodigal Son story. I know what it's like to lose all composure in the rescue of a helpless child.

I was the pastor of a struggling church, and the annual summer barbeque at the local river was a welcomed high point for us. It was a lazy summer day at a friend's home by the river and I decided to play one last game of volleyball before loading Tyler, my three-year old son, into the minivan. I made the mistake of removing and packing Tyler's life vest before the game. I guess I subconsciously assumed that he'd stay close to me, attached by some invisible tether of awesomeness that I was displaying in the volleyball pit (right!). It never occurred to me that he'd meander back down the hill to play by the water.

Ten minutes into our game, I heard a little voice in the distance.

"Tyler's in the water! Tyler's in the water!" I recognized the voice as Raelene, Tyler's little friend. It took about a nanosecond for me to discern that the panic in Raelene's voice was for real.

Did you know that when a person experiences a real threat to life and limb that it can mobilize the body's nervous system into a "fight or flight" mode?

In one split second, my sympathetic nervous system ignited every muscle in my body to action. I came out of that volleyball pit with a supersonic boom—barreling down the hill with the other parents close behind me.

I would've made it to the dock first except I had so much momentum that I tripped and had a dirt snack on my way down the hill. I scampered back to my feet in a flailing, ugly run. Some who were

following close behind me jumped straight into the water to look for Tyler.

Then I saw him.

He was floating face down in the water while trying reach up and grab the side of the pier. I went cold as I caught a glimpse of my precious little boy struggling for his very life. A friend scooped him up out of the water and stretched him out on the dock. They began massaging his legs and opening his airways as he spit up all of the river water in his lungs and began to cry.

Oh the blessed sound of crying! In that moment as I held him close, the more he cried the more my fear transformed into relief. And I would like to say that I handled all of it with pastoral dignity and appropriate poise. But the truth is that I have never felt as embarrassed or undignified as I did in those few moments. I was a complete wreck.

Mercy is Never Late

That's also the picture of God on a cross: he's an absolute wreck. How else can we explain God's willingness to leave the sparkle and polish of Heaven to become the undignified, naked sacrifice for humanity? It's easy for me to imagine a changeless and immovable deity who never gets his feathers ruffled over my suffering. I am comfortable with my neat and tidy theological categories. But I have to remind myself that God sees lost children through the eyes of a lovesick dad. A dad who was willing to get wrecked in the process of winning back his lost children.

Paul stated, "At just the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). Population analysts tell us that 99% of the earth's population has lived after Jesus.³ In other words, of the 108 billion people who have ever lived on earth, nearly 107 billion have lived after Jesus died on the cross. This means that the Son of God showed up at just the right time in human history, so that the church, empowered by the Spirit, would carry his Gospel into the ages. He appeared at just the right time in order to save lost people.

Mercy is never late.

Jesus taught that we could learn what the Father is like by extrapolating from the best of human nature. Would a father give a son a cold stone if he asks for bread? Would he give him a slithering serpent if he asks for fish to eat? "Though you are evil," Jesus declared, "you know how to give good gifts to your children. So how much more does God want to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

How must his great heart ache for those who are drowning in a self-made hell of addiction, deception, or pain? That's the reason why he came. To rescue lost sons and daughters—to give them the good gift of His Spirit. And all we have to do is reach out and take hold of it through repentance. This is what it means to fully surrender to a God in pursuit. This is what it means to become his disciple, his apprentice, and his follower.

Conclusion

The Seeker: Luke's Gospel
Part 15: No Lost Causes-The Lost Son Returns
September 24, 2017 / Jeff Kennedy

I learned something about myself at the river that summer day. I learned that I am the kind of father who is moved to action—who runs into the fray in order to save a drowning child. And this paternal impulse teaches me about the Heavenly Father. It teaches me that God is in pursuit of lost sons and daughters. He does not think lightly of our predicament.

This is why the down-and-outers and the burnouts of the world find Jesus irresistible. We are drawn to a God who offers us transformation. Instinctively we know that we deserve something much worse than we're getting. Our hunch is that there must be justice for wrongdoing. We raise the white flag of surrender and we are stunned to discover the mercy that awaits us—as we embrace the one who took the full brunt of God's justice upon himself.

Discipleship to Jesus starts with an arresting encounter with the God who calls us to reconciliation; with the knowledge that the judge of the universe is in pursuit of us. And if we will ever stop long enough for him to catch up, we may be shocked to discover what his real intentions are. Intentions of forgiveness. Designs on our redemption.

¹ Geza Vermez, *Jesus the Jew: A Historians Reading of the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981, 46-47.

² *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*.

³ Wright, N.T., *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2004) p. 187.