

The Prodigal God - The people around Jesus

Luke 15:1-10

This sermon series (The Prodigal God)
draws on the work of Tim Keller.

I enjoy a good story but the best stories are the ones that are true. Not just true in that they record accurately historical events, but true in the sense they illustrate who we are as human beings - how the world is.

Jesus was a brilliant story-teller. Much of his teaching took the form of parables – not historical events but stories that profoundly exposed the truth about who we are as human beings and who God is. The Bible often records that people were astonished, amazed, shocked at Jesus' teaching. They had never heard anything remotely like it and they hung on every word.

Perhaps Jesus' most famous parable is one involving two very different sons and the Father who loved them both. Some commentators suggest that the multi-layered meaning of the story is the best summary of all of Jesus life, teaching and ministry.

Last week we listened to Tim Keller who very profoundly told us the story and elaborated on it. Tim Keller, says this about the story we know as The Prodigal Son and he calls The Prodigal God: Prodigal meaning recklessly extravagant, and hopefully you will see how God is recklessly extravagant. Anyway Tim Keller said this about the parable.

If all the teaching of Jesus is likened to a lake, this famous parable would be one of the clearest spots where we can see all the way to the bottom.
(Tim Keller)

Over the next three weeks we will be plunging into the depths of this story. But before we do we need to ask ourselves some questions: In fact these are questions we need to ask ourselves whenever we read the bible as it can help us understand what the main point is. The questions are:

- Who did Jesus tell this story to?
- What is its context?
- What challenges, if any, was Jesus responding to?

We heard the whole story last week but today we are going to look more at the setting of the story:

Luke 15:1-10

Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

³So Jesus told them this story: ⁴"If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!

Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbours and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

In New Zealand we live in a very egalitarian culture. Compared with many places we do not have a class system. Except, perhaps, when it comes to flying!

When Gay and I did a fair few long haul flights while we were away at the beginning of last year we could not help but look on with envy at the Business Class seats, beds is more accurate, as we trudged our way towards the back of the plane, typically wedged alongside parents with two screaming kids and someone who I could guarantee was going to be a snorer. As soon as we were seated the curtains were pulled separating the great unwashed in economy

class, from the privileged few in Business Class, and the even more privileged in the rarefied air of First Class which we never saw at all.

Two different groups

In Jesus day there was a very definite class system. In the reading we have just heard we find that Jesus was surrounded by two particular and distinct classes of people.

There are the Pharisees, a group of very religious men who were committed to studying the scriptures and living a holy and pure life. The Pharisees were very committed to understanding and applying God's law in living their lives. To help them do this, drawing on tradition and their understating of the scriptures, they developed their own rules as to how one should live to please God. There were rules for everything: how you ate, how and when you worshipped, sexual relationships, how and when you bathed, what clothes you wore, what you did on the Sabbath...everything. The Pharisees took particular pride in applying their life to keeping and upholding these traditions. They were the rule-keepers.

When we were in Israel last year Gay and I spent a Saturday there, the Jewish Sabbath day of rest. As I am sure you know, in Jewish faith it is forbidden to work on the Sabbath. And so in the hotel we were staying in there was no cooked breakfast on Saturday, as there was one every other day. There was not even the usual toaster to toast your bread – a cooked breakfast and toasting bread would both involve work and breaking the rules of the Sabbath.

Our hotel was several floors high and had 4 lifts. On the Sabbath three of those lifts worked normally – you pushed the button and eventually the lift would come to your floor. The other lift was labelled a Sabbath lift and on Saturdays operated according to Sabbath rules. It travelled methodically up and then down, stopping at every floor. You see, you did not break Sabbath rules by getting on the lift, but you did by pushing the button for the lift.

Religion is about keeping the rules. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were the rule-keepers.

Then there were the tax-collectors and sinners. This was a motley group of outsiders, many of whom would have been shunned by Jewish culture because they had not kept the rules. If the Pharisees were the rule-keepers, sinners and tax-collectors were the rule-breakers.

- Tax-collectors broke the rules by not only associating with the Roman occupiers, but by working for them.
- People suffering from leprosy, or suffering long-term illness, or with a physical disability. They must have broken the rules to be suffering the way they did.
- Prostitutes broke the rules about sexual purity.

The problem for the Pharisees is that Jesus, himself a teacher of the law, spent time with sinners – the rule-breakers. Not only did he spend time with them, he ate with them!

I am sure you are familiar with the saying, ‘You are what you eat’?

In Jesus’ day the saying wasn’t ‘You are what you eat.’ It was, ‘You are *who* you eat with.’ And so if you ate with the rule-breakers, you became a rule-breaker yourself. The Pharisees were accusing Jesus of guilt by association:

The Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

This was not an observation. It was an accusation.

Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking, he could overhear their muttering. Rather than slinking away and avoiding their accusations of questionable behaviour, he stares them down with not one, but three stories about lost things being found. Actually, to be precise Jesus tells the one story in three different ways.

There are three different scenes to the story:

In the **first scene** a shepherd with one hundred sheep loses one. He leaves the ninety nine to go on a search and rescue mission for the lost sheep. He returns from the wilderness with the sheep on his shoulders, rejoicing as he walks.

In the **second scene** an unnamed woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She turns her house upside down – looks under the couch, in the bottom of the washing machine, under the bed, through the bins – until she finds it. And when she does find it, joy overflows.

The **third scene** a rebellious son turns his back on his Father, losing himself in a place where no-one knows him and where he can do whatever he likes. Broke and hungry he turns towards home, but before he can splutter out his excuses,

his Father – the one he rejected – runs to him in open, joy-filled embrace. The lost has been found!

Three scenes telling the same story of lost things being found.

The Pharisees had a particular view of what was sinful – what was wrong in the eyes of God. A sinful person was someone who broke the religious rules. Sinful people were the rule-breakers. And rule-breakers are lost to God.

But in these three scenes Jesus goes way beyond the Pharisees definition of sin.

As everyone knows sheep are renowned for their stupidity, which was no different in Jesus' day. And so the people hearing Jesus when he spoke this parable would immediately assume the sheep was lost because of its foolishness. It did a dumb, sheep-like thing and was separated from the rest of the flock and the shepherd that protected it.

In a similar way, we all know that a coin is an inanimate object, incapable of thought and certainly incapable in itself of finding its way home.

Finally, the rebellious son finds himself lost in a far country because of his own poor choices.

The sheep is lost because of foolishness. The coin is lost because of thoughtlessness. The son is lost because of wilfulness.

In these three scenes Jesus is challenging the Pharisees superficial view of sin – that sin is breaking religious rules. Jesus is saying that people find themselves lost – far from God – for a complex set of reasons.

Let me illustrate this a little. Can I confess that if the right set of buttons get pushed, I can get angry. I don't think too many of you here will have seen it, and I hope you never do, but yes it does happen.

As you will have guessed with a surname Cochran, I come from a Scottish heritage. We Scots are infamous for our short fuses going right a back to the warring tribes of the Scottish highlands. Is my problem with anger genetic? Just as a sheep is hardwired to be foolish – am I hard-wired by me heritage to be angry?

I grew up in a loving, warm, loving, Christian home with two incredible parents. But it would be fair to say that both of them know how to express themselves. Like most kids, we could push mum and dad to breaking point sometimes.

There were numerous times I remember where one would start to fume with anger and stomp to the kitchen draw and rattle it, threatening us with death and destruction with the dreaded wooden spoon. Is my problem with anger the result of the few times my mother or father lost their cool as parents? Rather than genetics, was it my environment that failed me, like it did the coin?

Or do I erupt with anger purely because of my poor choices, my ill-discipline – just as the lost son made poor choices?

The fact is, sin (mistakes and failures) occur in our lives for a mixture of complex reasons – our foolishness, our thoughtlessness, our wilfulness. Tim Keller puts it this way:

Sin is deeply complex. It is inborn in you, it is magnified by sinful treatment, and is deepened and shaped by your own choices. (Tim Keller)

The bad news that Jesus is pointing out to the Pharisees is that all of us, even those of us who are religious, for whatever set of reasons, are lost in our sin.

This is the bad news, but actually not the main point of the parables.

The Good News, the main point, illustrated in each of the scenes is that God seeks that which is lost. Many people understand religion to be humanities search for God. But the message Jesus preached gives exactly the opposite notion: We do not find God by searching hard and long for him – God searches for and finds us. The lost sheep does not find its shepherd; the lost coin does not find its owner; the lost son does not run to his father.

Religion says that if we seek long enough, if we try hard enough we will find God. Jesus says that we don't come to God. God comes to us on an astonishing rescue mission.

This is Good News almost too good to be true. The people in Jesus day known as sinners knew the language of rejection.

They saw people look away in the streets; they knew the feeling of shame as people crossed the street to avoid their presence. They heard the Pharisees judgmental statements and, in their heart of hearts, they believed them. So when these stories were told, they knew they were the lost ones. But could it be true that God was seeking them? Could it be true that God throws a party, a celebration, a feast every time he finds a lost son or daughter?

In these three scenes – in this story – Jesus is saying to the Pharisees who accuse him of eating with sinners and to the sinners who only knew rejection, not only do I eat with sinners – those who are lost – but when I search for and find them, I throw a party. I invite them to my table. I celebrate their coming home! In fact, all heaven rejoices!

I know there are some, because of the pain of their past, find it incredibly hard to believe that they are lovable. They have stuffed up so many times they begin to believe they are a stuff-up. They have made so many mistakes they begin to believe they must be a mistake. The Good News in Jesus' parable of a God who seeks to save us from our past sounds just too good to be true.

But this is not the God Jesus reveals.

Can I conclude with another story I came across that goes towards illustrating the good news of God's extravagant love:

As this lady got on the plane she noticed a young woman with her baby. They were both dressed beautifully in white dresses. The mother was smiling, and the little baby was saying "Dada, Dada." The little baby was a darling. They sat down opposite me. Every time anybody went by, the baby would say, "Dada, Dada."

The young mother said they were going home, and Daddy was waiting for them.

Mum was happy the baby was happy, in fact everyone around was enjoying the little baby.

The mother had a bottle with orange juice in it. She kept feeding the baby, a little fruit, a plain biscuit and then a little juice. There was a bit of turbulence. Every time the baby cried the mother fed her a little bit more orange juice and a little more fruit.

I don't know how to tell this story without being a bit gross. As I said the flight was rough, very rough. All of the fruit that had gone down came up. In fact more came up than had gone down; in fact it seemed there was more up than there was baby, and it was pretty bad; the carpet was not in good condition, the baby was not in good condition and the mum was not in good condition. The place was a mess.

Those on the opposite side of the aisle also were not in good condition either. They kept trying to tell the young mother it was just fine. They

were handing her tissues and things. The baby was crying, and she looked awful. Half the plane looked awful. The mother was so apologetic about it.

They landed. The minute they touched the ground, baby was all smiles: "Dada, Dada." Everyone else was still awful. The person telling the story looked out and there waiting was a young man who had to be Daddy: suit, white shirt, tie, flowers. She thought, I know what's going to happen. He's going to run to that baby who now looks awful. The hair and the dress were dreadful. He's going to run to that baby, take one look, and keep on running, saying, "Not my kid!"

As he ran to the young mother, she threw the baby at him, and left quickly to go get cleaned up. He picked up that baby, and she watched him as he hugged that baby and kissed that baby and stroked that baby's hair. He said, "Daddy's baby's come home."

She watched them all the way to the luggage claim area. He never stopped kissing that baby. He never stopped welcoming that baby back home. Those of us who are parents have all felt that love at some stage with our kids.

Where did we ever get the idea that our Father God is less loving than a young dad in a white shirt.