

The Storyteller / Week 1

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! (Luke 15:1-2 NLT)

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” (Luke 15:11-32 NIV)

Is there anyone in your family that tells the same story over and over again since you were a little kid? My mom told me the story of the two wolves. There are two wolves that live inside us. There is a good wolf and a bad wolf. The good wolf does good things and the bad wolf does bad things. They are constantly battling within us to see which one we will resemble and the impact we have on the world around us. The one that will win is the one you feed. You feed the wolves through your actions and thoughts. Whichever one you feed is the one you will resemble. The purpose of this story was to show me that my thoughts and actions directly correlate to the type of person I become. This made me want to choose good thoughts and actions so that I would grow to be a good person that impacts the world for the better.

Stories are like that. They make learning a lesson a little easier. They stick with us—which is why Jesus told stories all the time. His were called parables, which basically just means a story that has a spiritual point or a lesson behind it. For the next few weeks, we’re going to look at some parables that came from the great Storyteller, stories that meant something to the original audience and have a lot to say to us, too.

To start, we’re going to look at a story Jesus told that was recorded by Luke, who first gave us some context to the audience Jesus was talking to:

“Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach” (Luke 15:1 NLT).

In other words, **bad people liked to be around Jesus**. In that culture, it was fairly obvious who the “sinners” were. It was also obvious who the good, “religious” people were. And as you can imagine, they didn’t love the idea of Jesus associating with such a rough crowd.

“This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!” (Luke 15:1-2, NLT).

It’s easy to think that the religious people were a bunch of critical jerks! But isn’t it true that things aren’t much different today? Sure, most of us think it’s great that Jesus loves sinners, but when it comes to *us* inviting people to *our church* or *our small group* or *our house for dinner*, it’s much tougher, isn’t it? **For those of us who are church people, sometimes we can’t help but look down on people who don’t have it all together, or who have questionable reputations because of choices they’ve made.** Sure, Jesus loves them, but it’s still tempting to think, *Why are they here?*

Or, maybe you’re on the other side and see yourself as one of the “sinners.” **And while it’s great that people with bad reputations liked hanging with Jesus a couple thousand years ago, you don’t exactly feel welcomed by the “religious” crowd today.**

Whether you’re in with the religious crowd or you’d consider yourself a “sinner,” the problem is the same. **We feel like in order to be in with God, people have to behave a certain way.** We feel like certain groups fit in with Jesus, while other groups don’t.

It’s a tension that has been around basically forever, *especially* in the church. And maybe that’s why the great Storyteller told one of His most famous stories about it.

Jesus started by telling a short story of a shepherd who lost one of his sheep and went to look for it. He then told a quick story about a woman who lost a coin and swept her house to find it. He finished by telling the headline story, which was about a man and his two sons. It started like this:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate.’ So he divided the property between them” (Luke 15:11-12, NIV).

Basically, a son told his father, “Dad, I know you’re going to leave me some stuff when you die. But instead of waiting for that to happen, can you just go ahead and give it to me *now?*” For some reason, the dad agrees.

“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 (Luke 15:13, NIV).

He’s like the guy who wins the lottery but doesn’t have any money management skills. He goes crazy. He makes a bunch of poor decisions with his cash that leave him with nothing to show for it.

“After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything” (Luke 15:14-16, NIV).

The son went from rich to so broke that he wanted to eat the food he was feeding pigs. When he lived with his family, all his needs were taken care of. Now he was taking care of the needs of pigs.

Thankfully, the story doesn't end there.

“When he [the younger son] came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So, he got up and went to his father.”

What is your favorite color? The boy understood that his father's servants lived *way* better than him. So, he decided to go home and make a deal with his dad. He didn't expect to get his old status back and for all to be forgiven. He just wanted a warm bed and a good meal, and he would work for his father as an employee to get it.

If you were in the audience when Jesus told this story, you probably had an idea of how this was going to go. The dad would give the son a long lecture, show him some mercy, and give him a job as a servant. And this would've been a good ending, because the son didn't even deserve *that!*

But that's not what happened. Check it out:

Jesus told the story this way: *“But while he [the younger son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:20b).*

As soon as his son came into view, the father wasted no time running up to him. The son didn't even have a chance to say anything yet! The dad, without hearing a word, hugged his son and kissed him! But the son had a speech prepared:

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:21-24, NIV).

The son expected to be treated like a servant. But the dad wasn't interested in that. He had his *son* back. In throwing the party and giving him the ring and robe, the dad was saying: “All is forgiven. Consider it over and done with. I don't see your mistakes. I see YOU. Now let's enjoy the party!”

Now's a good time to remember the two groups of people who were listening to this story. For the sinners in the crowd, this message was unlike anything they had ever heard. No punishment for his mistakes? No relational or physical distance between the father and the son? That sounds incredible!

But for the religious leaders, this didn't sound so great. Wouldn't this make the father look bad? Wouldn't it be encouraging more bad behavior from the son later? There SHOULD be distance between the father and the son. The son messed up and someone needed to pay!

But Jesus wasn't done with the story. He talked about the older brother, who heard there was a party being thrown for his rebellious little brother:

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“My son,’ the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:28-32, NIV).

The father enjoyed the party. The younger son enjoyed the party. And the older son? We never find out what happens. Did he go to the party? Did he welcome his brother back? Or did he keep his distance? We don't know, but would anyone REALLY blame him if he took a pass and skipped the party? He did everything right. Why did the rebellious son get the royal treatment from dad?

But that's what makes this story one that people are unlikely to forget. Jesus was looking at his audience—the sinners and the religious leaders—and He knew that they both agreed that the younger son *should* have to pay for his bad behavior, and the older son *should* be rewarded for his good behavior.

Instead, they got something totally different. A younger brother who didn't fix anything in his life before the party. And an older brother who didn't like it. A younger brother who was placed in the family again. And an older brother who was so mad that he risked missing the party completely.

In this parable, the great Storyteller was making a point to the people who were unsure if they were qualified to follow Him because of their mistakes. To them, the story said . . .

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE FIXED TO BE FOUND.

To the religious leaders who were frustrated and angry because Jesus seemed too soft on sin, the story said: “Careful. **You don't get to decide how fixed someone has to be before they are found.**”

The incredible thing about this story is that its message still matters today.

- **For people who think they've gone too far, messed up too much, and done too many bad things, Jesus says, “I will NEVER give up on you.”**
- **And for the people who are making good decisions and doing things right, Jesus says, “Don't EVER give up on someone else.”**

No one loses their value just because they've lost their way. **No matter where you are or what you've done, you are worth finding.** And Jesus isn't waiting for you to fix your life before you come to Him.

The question today is, “Who are you in the story?”

If you consider yourself one of the “good” kids, I want you to think a moment about the people who you believe need to be fixed before they find a place here. Ask yourself: **If Jesus doesn't think they need to be fixed to be found, why do I?** Think of one or two of your lost friends, and start praying for them and hanging out with them in safe places, purposefully reach out to them. Start intentionally being a great friend to a person who needs more Jesus in his or her life. In being a friend to them as they are now, you are representing the heart of Jesus.

For others of you, you may feel like the younger son. You feel like you've disqualified yourself from church and Jesus' love. And you figure that there's a whole lot of things you need to get right before Jesus will be good with you. But here's the good news: **Jesus always has open arms for someone like you. You may have lost your way, but you haven't lost your value.** Whatever your past, whatever your struggle, Jesus is ready for you. Take a step in His direction. Believe that what He says about you is true. That He isn't waiting for you to change in order to love and accept you. You're already found.

Remember: You don't have to be fixed to be found. The son who came home was still a mess. You might still be a mess. Your friend may be a mess. But people can come home messy. The Father is the one who will receive you, redeem you, and restore you. You may lose your way, but you will never lose your value. You can go to God just as you are, and you can help others do the same thing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What storybook do you remember most from your childhood?
2. Why do you think stories are so memorable and can affect us so much?
3. In your own words, retell the parable of the prodigal son. What stuck out to you?
4. In what ways are you like the older brother? In what ways are you like the younger brother?
5. As you heard the story, did you find yourself wanting to judge the younger brother or feeling like you get why the older brother is angry?
6. What message do you send others by the way you treat them?
7. Why is it difficult to celebrate people who come to church or come to God when we think they haven't behaved well?
8. How can we, as a group, celebrate people who come back to group after being gone for a while without making it awkward?
9. How can the way we see people change the way we treat them? How can the way we see ourselves affect the way we treat ourselves?