

CELEBRATE?

Luke 15:20-32

How many different ways can people make a mess of things? There seem to be endless possibilities. We can group these into some general categories such as unconscious and conscious. The unconscious category can be subdivided into careless (unthinking) pursuits of natural tendencies and (secondly) simply blindly going along with worldly forces. The conscious category might be called “deliberate” or “willful” rejection of authority and can manifest itself in several motivational subsets such as pride, greed, or sensuality. The problems resulting from whatever category can be equally bad, costly or dangerous. Jesus related three stories about different life situations that were intended to answer questions raised by the “religious in crowd” regarding why Jesus associated with the deplorable people (tax collectors and sinners) of that day.

We are familiar with these accounts as the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Story of the Lost Son. The lost sheep is an example of unthinking pursuits of natural tendencies such as eating tasty clumps of grass and not paying attention to the fact that it (the sheep) was moving away, not only from the flock but also from the shepherd. The lost coin story is an example of people who are totally oblivious to what is happening in the world and they just fall victim to societal pressures in much the same way that the coin fell victim to the forces of gravity. In both cases, the carelessness (of the sheep) and the passiveness (of the coin) resulted in both being “lost” and unavailable for their intended purposes.

The story of the lost son is a good example of a conscious, willful decision on the part of a person to reject the situation of being subject to the authority of another person. One could argue that this rejection was actually a rejection of the person who represented the authority of the situation in which he found himself. It is difficult to know if the motivation for such action was the anticipated pleasure of unacceptable behavior or just the sense of being “in charge” of one’s own destiny.

In these cases, we see significantly different approaches of those who experienced the loss. In the case of the sheep that wandered off and the coin that was dropped, both the shepherd and the woman make a significant effort to find and restore that which was lost to its proper place. In the case of the son who willfully went away, the father did not pursue him and attempt to bring him back to his home. Instead, he knew that the son needed to realize that being away from the providence, protection, and presence of the father was a big mistake. For that to happen, the son needed to find failure in the supposed pleasures of that which tempted him to leave the father. Even the freedom to “make decisions on our own” turns into an onerous burden when we don’t have the guidance of Godly principles upon which we can rely.

Forgiveness Granted – 15:20-24

²⁰ “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ “And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly 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 fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:20–24 (NASB95)

The first sentence in this account contains a key element in what was necessary for the son to be restored to the family of his father. In the story line of all the terrible things that the young man experienced as a result of his choice to leave the benefits of his father’s household

we see that he eventually came to realize that the fruit of deciding for himself what is good and what is bad is not only bitter, it leaves a person lacking the nourishment that is needed for living.

To say that he regretted the decision to leave is an understatement. The promised pleasures in the far country were not only momentary, they were also extremely costly and were outright “expenses” rather than “investments” that would pay dividends to provide for future needs.

The decision to return to his father’s home and seek relief as a hired servant appears to be primarily driven by physical hunger. He did realize that his father was good in that even the hired servants were given adequate provisions to live; however, there is nothing in the account that hints that his conscience bothered him or that he had a renewed love for his father. To his credit, not only did he make a decision to return home, he actually took action to do what he decided should be done. Warren Wiersbe’s comment on this was “Our resolutions may be noble, but unless we act on them, they can never of themselves bring about any permanent good.”

There are many people in the world today who have come to the realization that they have made a grand mess of their lives by sinful choices of the past. They may even come to the conclusion that life would be so much better if they would abandon what they doing and seek help from God and they resolve to do it tomorrow, but tomorrow never comes and nothing changes.

As mentioned earlier, the father did not pursue his son after his willful choice to leave. Instead, the father waited and watched for evidence of his son’s return. At the first sign, the father ran to the son and outwardly expressed his love for his son by embracing and kissing him. The desire of God for His people to turn (return) to Him is found in several passages in the Old Testament and is also mentioned by James in his letter (4:8) where we see “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

The son had thought through what his confession would be to his father and had also formulated a proposed arrangement of how he might be received into the household of his father. The proposed arrangement was that he was willing to be a hired laborer on his father’s estate. He had rehearsed both the confession and the proposal and as soon as he was able to speak to his father, he stated the confession that he had sinned against heaven and in the sight of his father and was not worthy to be regarded as a son.

The confession started with acknowledging that sin and especially deliberately making wrong choices is first and foremost transgressing against divine principles given by God’s grace to all humanity. In addition to being an affront to God, such action typically impacts other persons as is the case with the rejection that the father sensed when his younger son wanted to be free of his influence. As is typically the situation, wrong actions and decisions can negatively impact and hurt other people, especially those who are closely related to us. It is also typically true that most of us do not give any consideration regarding how our decisions affect others since our focus is mainly upon ourselves.

What is implied in the statement by the son that he believed that he was no longer “worthy” to be named a son of his father? There may be multiple implications in this statement. One possibility could be that certain behaviors are associated with (or expected of) children in a family and give evidence of the family relationship. In this present example, the evidence was not there. Prodigal (extravagant and wasteful) behavior was certainly not characteristic of the father’s family. We could also argue that living in filthy conditions and eating food intended for swine was not befitting of someone associated with his father’s family. Another possibility is that the son thought that being considered part of the father’s family was something to be earned

by going through the right motions and procedures.

The only thing that actually determined whether the young man was his father's son was the fact that he had been born into his father's family. The lack of evidence (proper behavior) and the inability to earn the status of son ship did not keep the father from loving and receiving his son upon his return.

The son was not able to finish the second part of his rehearsed speech about being regarded as a hired servant. His father's action showed that he had been received as a son and that negated the possibility of the alternative proposal the son was willing to make.

The fact that it was physical hunger and a need for survival that motivated the son to return did not enter into the father's consideration of acceptance. The fact of his return was enough. Many times, people will respond to an invitation to be saved simply motivated by self-preservation or from their sense of missing meaningfulness in their lives. We recall the invitation stated by Isaiah (55:1) "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

The acceptance of the returning son by the father was not in mere words. He immediately took action to demonstrate that "acceptance" by restoring the things that showed evidence of the dignity and status that accompanied being a son in his family.

MacLaren noted that "God's giving always follows His forgiving." If forgiveness means that our sins and trespasses are removed from us as far as the east is from the west and they are remembered no more, then it is appropriate that the father would provide the penitent son with those things that accompany a person who is actually a son.

If the once-errant son was to take his place as a son of the father, then he should be dressed appropriately. The prodigal was dressed in rags that had the stench of the world embedded into the fabric and these needed to be replaced with a clean garment that properly covered him. The robe was a one-piece garment and from this we can see an implication of integrity. It was appropriate attire for dining at the father's table which would come a little later in the series of events that celebrated the fact that the son who was alive and back home. There are many references in Scripture of clothing metaphors that picture what should happen in our lives when we repent and turn to God for salvation. The most significant reference is, of course, that those who are pardoned are stripped of their rags and clothed with a new nature which God Himself provides. In Romans chapter thirteen, Paul instructed us to lay aside the deed of darkness and clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ring for his hand was a symbol of many positive benefits such as wealth, position, delegated authority, and was a witness to all those in the father's household that this person represented his father.

The importance of proper shoes is little appreciated until we find ourselves stepping on an object with our bare feet. Shoes do wear out and it is likely that the wayward son did not have proper shoes to wear. Shoes represent what a person needs for the walk of daily living. In a spiritual sense, we remember Paul's words about the Christian's need to be prepared for our walk by having our feet shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.

The last step that Jesus mentioned in the parable was the celebrative feast. Just as in the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin there were celebrations and rejoicing over the restoration of that which was lost. In the case of the sheep recovering just 1 percent of the total was cause to rejoice, the lost coin represented 10 percent and in the situation regarding the lost son, there was a 50 percent recovery which was of such significance that a feast was a fitting way to share the joy with others in the household. It was also something that the returning son would appreciate

since physical hunger was the primary reason that he decided to return to the father. The feast was more than adequate to satisfy the son's hunger and shows us that when God blesses us it is "over and above what we might ask or think" (Eph 3:20).

Resentment Expressed – 15:25-30

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷ "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ "But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. ²⁹ "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; ³⁰ but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' Luke 15:25–30 (NASB95)

The purpose of the parable was to answer the complaint raised by the Scribes and Pharisees regarding Jesus associating and even sharing food with deplorable people such as notorious sinners and tax collectors. Of course, the wayward son was emblematic of the deplorable ones and the older son (who was careful to do all the expected things of a son) represented the respected religious people such as the Scribes and Pharisees.

The fact that the older son became angry is evidence that he was not aligned with the attitude and affections of his father. As such he was estranged from his father but did not show his resentment because of his desire to enjoy the benefits of the relationship. He saw himself in bondage to his father and the jealousy regarding his younger brother was such that he allowed his resentment to impact his action by not entering into what the father was doing.

The action of the father toward the elder son was that he took initiative to go to him to resolve the estranged (separated or lost) situation by reminding him of the abundance of what he had by being in the father's household. When we have more than we can use, then we are never justified in resenting others who have wants and needs being blessed.

Reality Defined – 15:31-32

³¹ "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' " Luke 15:31–32 (NASB95)

His complaint was that during all the years of his faithfully following all the rules and regulations and accouterments of formal family relationship that he was never even given a young goat to celebrate with his friends. In this case of the older son, he was in such a position during all these years that he could have taken the initiative and had whatever was available (calf, goat, or whatever) to celebrate with his friends at any time he wanted to do it.

Everything the father owned was available to the older son. This is also true for us today in the church. We have access through Christ to the riches and abilities of God and we can enjoy and celebrate in this when there is the occasion to celebrate. What is an appropriate occasion to celebrate? According to these three parables, it is finding and restoring that which was lost. How do we do that? The way is clearly stated in the final instructions of Jesus to His disciples. "As you go about your lives, make disciples of all nations."