

## Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. (*Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one*).

## Prayer and Praises

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## The Father and His Two Sons

### Luke 15:11-32

*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*

## Parables of Jesus

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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.’”

This story is one of three that come to us in the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel. All three are on the same basic theme: God’s concern for the lost.<sup>1</sup>

- How do you define “lost”? Who might be some people who are lost?

Shortly after the younger son receives his inheritance, he leaves home. We have a feeling that this was his wish all along; he wanted to head off to the city with his money and live his own kind of life. Unfortunately, his new life is not a good one. Jesus describes his location as “a distant country,” and this phrase can be seen as describing the son’s spiritual journey in geographical terms.<sup>2</sup>

- What might be a modern interpretation of going “to a distant country”?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables of Jesus*, 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

## Parables of Jesus

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After coming to his senses, the young man talked to himself. He reminded himself that many of his father's hired hands had bread enough and to spare, even though he was starving. Then he made a grand decision: "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands' "3

- *Do you see the young man's decision to return home as courageous? Desperate? Selfish? Some other way? Why?*

But the mood of rejoicing ends with the appearance of the older brother. He "was in the field," for he was industrious and ambitious. As this older brother drew near the house, he heard the sounds of celebration. Instead of going in and seeing for himself, he called a servant for a report. The servant explained that his brother had returned and that the father was celebrating with a fatted calf because the boy was home safe and sound. "Then he became angry and refused to go in" (15:28).4

- *Do you feel the older brother is justified in his feelings? Do you feel he is being petty and vindictive?*
- *With which character – the older brother or the younger brother – do you identify?*

When the older brother spoke to the father, he said, "This son of yours...has devoured your property with prostitutes" (15:30). The older brother's description of the younger son's activity may have been correct, but note this is the first time such detail comes into the story. We are left to wonder if the older son is speaking from knowledge or just angry from suspicion. Indeed, he may even be speaking from envy; sometimes we condemn in others sins that we wish to commit ourselves.5

- *What do you think was the motivation for the older brother's accusation?*
- *Have you ever encountered someone who was guilty of the sin they accused someone else of? Or envious of the sin they accused someone else of?*

And that is where the story ends.

- *Brainstorm a list of possible conclusions to the parable. How does the new conclusion affect the point of the original story?*
- *People usually picture God as the father in the parable. How does the story change if we identify as the father?*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 34.

The good news of this parable is its portrayal of the grace of God.<sup>6</sup>

- *How do you define “grace”?*

The scribes and Pharisees to whom this parable was told were the most upright people in town in Jesus’ day. They were earnestly and vigorously religious. They tithed, they fasted, and they fulfilled the minute details of the Mosaic law. Nevertheless, these rigid moralists did not seem to have an understanding of the heart of God. The tragedy of the older brother is that he could live a lifetime in his father’s house and take in so little of his father’s spirit. Unfortunately, the same thing is sometimes true of us.<sup>7</sup>

- *Explore the comment, “The tragedy of the older brother...” Do you live in God’s house?*

Jesus was not satisfied with simple tolerance for others. He was calling on all the scribes and Pharisees to rejoice in the homecoming of tax collectors and sinners. A party spirit was to prevail. Much of the religion of the time did not seem to include much of the quality of gladness even in the midst of proper behavior, so introducing joy on the behalf of sinners was an especially difficult task. The idea was not that sinners should be admitted somewhat grudgingly; a celebration was to be mounted in their honor!

The problem of intolerance is with us still. Churches can so easily become exclusive clubs for “nice” people.<sup>8</sup>

- *Do you think the church can be intolerant and exclusivistic by being “nice”? How would you describe that activity?*

This parable and the two that precede it in Luke 15 all emphasize the mood of celebration. “Rejoice with me” is the recurring theme.”<sup>9</sup>

- *To what degree are our churches marked by such a spirit?*
- *Do I rejoice as much when our church brings in a marginal teenager or an unstable adult as I do when the new member is a leading person in the community?*

Perhaps the best way to put the lesson of this parable into practice is to ask God to give us a clearer vision of those who need love desperately. Then begin seeking ways as an individual to reach out to such persons, and think of ways your congregation might do so. The measure of need is not simply or always economic poverty. Some of the greatest times of need occur when we are financially secure and socially esteemed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 40.