

Jesus: The Seeking Savior, Part 1

Luke 15

80-34

Some of you may know, most of you don't, but most of the time in my life I'm working on a special book project other than the commentaries. As you know, I'm always involved in writing these commentaries on the New Testament. People ask me why I always teach the New Testament and the answer is because I really feel in my heart that God wants me to teach the whole New Testament, get it all down on tape and then write commentaries on all of it. And some years ago I signed a contract with Moody Press to do that and I estimate that that's about thirty-five volumes. And if I work fast, I'll finish when I'm 74. So, I have to keep doing that and I have to stay in the New Testament to keep working with that material.

But from time to time in my studies, there are also issues that come up and I really desire to write on those issues because I think they're important. For the last three years I've been working on putting together material for a book on the matter of the gospel according to Jesus. Years ago a Calvinist said to me one time, "Sometimes I don't think we present the gospel well enough for the non-elect to reject it." And that's quite an interesting statement. In other words, there seems to be some confusion about what the heart of the gospel is. What saving faith is, and so forth. So I have really spent a lot of my time and a lot of my teaching time and preaching time, as you know, dealing with the true gospel and the matter of genuine saving faith. And we find that emphasis a lot in the last two or three years because it's been on my mind as I've been trying to put this book together.

But there's one section of Scripture, one theme of the gospel record that I have not dealt with that I must deal with and that is the account of the story of Zacchaeus and related accounts in Luke. And so I've decided that right now is a good time to do that since I have to finish this material to get all of it in the book and everything. And I always preach what I'm preparing for the book because if I get that material in me it's going to come out anyway so I might as well preach it. And so I've been doing a lot of study on Zacchaeus and the text around the story of Zacchaeus, the familiar text of Luke 19:10. And so this Sunday morning and next Sunday morning I want us to look together at Luke 19.

Let's open our Bibles then and we'll examine at least verse 10 for today. And then next time we'll look at the story that illustrates that verse, the story of that little man named Zacchaeus who is a very important piece within the framework of the gospel record in relating the Lord's evangelistic approach and message.

In Luke 19 verses 1 to 9 is the story of Zacchaeus. The story is concluded in verse 9 and then the point of the story is given in verse 10, or the message. The principle which is illustrated in the story of Zacchaeus is this, verse 10, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." That sums up the reason why Luke recorded under the Holy Spirit's inspiration the story of Zacchaeus. It is a story of the Lord seeking and saving a lost man. And, frankly, my...it's my own opinion, I guess, that there is no more wonderful, no more glorious, no more important truth in the

Bible than this one in verse 10. That the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost is the single most important truth from the human viewpoint ever given in Scripture. That God came in human form to seek and save sinners is the heart of the Christian message and the heart of the hope of every believer. It sums up the whole purpose for the incarnation. God is a seeking God and Christ who reveals God is a seeking Savior who seeks lost men and women.

That's basic to the Christian faith from the fall of man in the garden. You remember that prior to the Fall, God walked and talked with man in the cool of the day and immediately after their sin it says in Genesis 3:8 and 9 that God came into the garden to talk with man and man and woman were hidden and God said, "Where are you?" And from that point to this and right on till Jesus comes, God will always be seeking lost men and women and asking "Where are you?"

In one of the most beautiful Old Testament texts, the prophet Ezekiel quoting God in chapter 34 verse 16 says, "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick." It is the nature of God that He is a seeker of lost men and women. One familiar poet identifies God as the "Hound of Heaven," a bloodhound on the trail of lost souls. God incarnate then, Jesus Christ, will also be a seeker of lost men and women. Jesus Christ, you'll remember, came to reveal God. Jesus said, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." Not in physical essence but in character, in nature, in essential being, in attributes. And if God is a God who seeks lost men and women, then Christ is a Savior who seeks lost men and women for Christ reveals God, Christ is God.

So, He says the Son of Man, verse 10, that's the Lord's favorite name for Himself, it emphasizes His humanity, Son of God obviously emphasizes His deity, Son of Man emphasizes His humanness, His condescension, His humiliation, His coming to be the sacrifice in behalf of man. For the Son of Man, God in human flesh, has come...and that refers to His birth, His incarnation, His entry into the world...to seek. This is what we call an infinitive of purpose in the Greek with the purpose of pursuing. The word means to pursue, to look for, to watch for, to strive for, to search after, to seek. So He says God has become incarnate, born into this world for the purpose of pursuing. And then comes another infinitive of purpose, "and to save." That familiar term has become a byword in the Christian faith, saved, salvation. We understand what that means. But the root Greek word means to rescue, or to deliver from danger or to preserve safe from harm. And the purpose then of the incarnation was to pursue and to deliver from harm, the Greek says the having been lost one, the one who is lost. The term "having been lost" is a verb form. It can also mean having been ruined, having been devastated, having been destroyed.

So, Jesus Christ came into the world with the purpose of pursuing after lost, devastated, ruined destroyed men and women in order to deliver them from danger, to rescue them from harm. Harm being the harm of sin, death and hell. Sin has devastated all men and women. Sin has left them marred and ruined and lost to their created purpose and lost to fellowship with God and lost to hope now and forever and lost to heaven and lost to glory and cut off from promise. They are alienated from the life of God. They are strangers to God. They are hopelessly doomed and damned and they stand in imminent danger of eternal hell. And so the purpose of Christ coming into the world was not to be an example, the purpose of Christ coming into the world was not to be a teacher, He did those things but the purpose for which He came was to rescue men and women from sin and death and hell and despair and hopelessness and to preserve them safe and unharmed forever and ever in His presence and in His glory.

In fact, in Matthew 1:21, the message was given "You shall call His name Jesus for He

shall...what?...save His people from their sins." His very name is the name of a Savior. He came to save. He came to call sinners to repentance. In fact, the Apostle Paul writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:15 says it is a trustworthy statement and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That's the heart of the gospel.

Now we know that's the heart of the gospel. But it's my personal conviction that Luke more than any other Bible writer seems bent on emphasizing that Jesus came to save the lost. It is a continual theme with him. It is at the heart of everything Luke has in mind in his gospel. And by the way, you might want to know Luke is the longest of the four gospels. It has fewer chapters than Matthew but more words. And the thrust of Matthew is to present Christ as King, but the thrust of Luke is to present Christ as the Son of Man who saves lost sinners. At the heart of what Luke is wanting us to understand is that Christ is a seeking Savior who seeks to redeem the lost. And so, when Luke 19:10, we have in a sense the summation of what Luke really wants to say. The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost.

Nowhere is this more clear than in chapter 15 and for the rest of our morning, I want you to turn back to chapter 15 and there and in related Scriptures we will illustrate chapter 19 verse 10. But here we have a magnificent set of parables to illustrate the Lord's yearning love for lost people.

Now I want you to understand the setting, and it is simply understood by noting verses 1 and 2. Luke 15:1, "Now all the tax gatherers and the sinners were coming near to Him to listen to Him." And it says in verse 2, almost without explanation this is apparent to us, this is a typical reaction, "And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Now notice back in verse 1, it says that all the tax gatherers and sinners were coming near to Him...all of them, not some of them, not a few of them, but all of them. Not only that, "they were coming near to Him" is an imperfect tense verb which means continual action, continually as a matter of common occurrence and habit, tax gatherers and sinners were collecting around Jesus. They are the riffraff of society. Sinners is a general category for people who are bad, they had bad reputations. They were a criminal element. They might be robbers and murderers, they might be harlots and prostitutes, they might be incestuous, there might be all kinds of sins that they were engaged in. But the bottom line on sinners is they were people who made no effort at all to live by the standard of Jewish law. For all intents and purposes, they had no regard for the ceremony, the ritual, the tradition or even the revelation that constituted defined Judaism. They were the bad people.

The tax gatherers, they were at the bottom of the list categorically among the bad people. Tax collectors were really seen as traitors.

The Romans, you remember, had dominated the world of the Jews. They had taken control as an occupying conqueror of the land of Palestine. And they had established in order to fund the Pax Romana and to fund that occupation, they had put into place a tax system. In order to exact those taxes and get them from the people, they sold tax franchises to Jews who were willing to become tax collectors among their own people. The Jews, you must understand, hated the Roman occupation. Their hatred is most volatile in group known as the Zealots. There were even some called the Sacari(?) who used swords and knives and went around as terrorists stabbing and killing Roman soldiers. The Jews despised that occupation and for a Jew to buy a tax franchise and then become employed by Rome to exact taxes from his own people was to be the ultimate traitor.

And, of course, the Roman government, the Roman custom system would in each district determine what taxes needed to be collected. And as long as the one who purchased the franchise, probably the highest bidder from Rome, paid Rome what Rome wanted, anything else he got he could keep. There would be a regional tax commissioner and under him some other tax collectors and under them some other tax collectors, all the way down to what we know in Jewish tradition as the little mokesh(?). The word mokesh referring to the actual collector himself who grabbed a guy by the tunic and got his money. And Matthew was one of those.

And so, here was this man who would buy a franchise and then he would hire underlings among his people who would collect the taxes. There were all kinds of taxes. There was a personal income tax, there was a poll tax just for existing to be paid by men fourteen to sixty-five and women twelve to sixty-five in those age groups. There was the tax on land that consisted of one tenth of all the grain grown and one fifth of the wine and oil that could be paid in kind or commuted into money. There was a tax on income, there was a tax on every conceivable kind of duty. There was a tax on your cart. A tax on each wheel on your cart and a tax on the number of animals pulling your cart. The tax on articles bought and articles sold, import tax, export tax. A tax collector could sit at a custom seat on the road somewhere, stop everybody, make them unload their burden and then begin to tax them somewhat discriminately or indiscriminately at his own behest. Robbers and murderers were lumped together with tax collectors. There was tremendous room not only to be a traitor but to be an extortionist. Rome wasn't really looking closely at everybody and men could become filthy rich, in the true sense of the word, by exacting taxes that were exorbitant from people. Tax collectors were thereby barred from the synagogue. They could not enter into the festivals and feast days of the land of the people.

So therefore, when a person became a tax collector, in every sense they became an outcast. They were cut off from the life of their people socially, they were cut off from the life of their people religiously. And they were known in general as a very bad group of people. In fact, one Roman writer tells us surprisingly that he once saw a monument built to an honest tax collector. The very fact that there was such a man deserved a monument in the eyes of some people.

So, there was dishonesty. There was graft. There was extortion. There was robbery, to say nothing of being a traitor. They were the outcasts of the people, the sinners and the tax collectors.

To associate with those kinds of people was contaminating, to eat with them was absolutely unthinkable. You have to understand in the Middle East that to have a meal with someone was to treat them as an honored guest or an honored friend. And to have dinner or lunch or whatever with a tax collector and a sinner would be, in effect, to honor the absolutely dishonorable. And so the Pharisees and the scribes in their typical sanctimonious self-righteousness said this man receives sinners and eats with them. And that's exactly why He came, to save those who were lost. He came for the sake of sinners.

Apparently these tax collectors and sinners felt Jesus accepted their presence. Obviously He did not accept their sin. Obviously He spoke boldly against their sin but they sensed in Him that seeking heart which marks the nature of God and marked the nature of Christ who sought sinners for the purpose not of condoning their sin but of saving them out of that sin. And no one knew their sinfulness better than tax gatherers and quote/unquote sinners.

In fact, this is such a great concern with Luke that by chapter 19 he has already mentioned tax collectors six times. And every time he mentions them, he mentions them in a favorable way. They're the kind of outcasts that Jesus found open to the message of the gospel.

Go back for a moment to chapter 5 of Luke and a very famous tax collector that I mentioned a moment ago by the name of Levi or Matthew. In verse 27 of Luke 5, Jesus noted a tax gatherer named Levi sitting in the tax office and said to him, "Follow Me." And here the Lord calls an outcast tax collector into His own personal service as one of the disciples. And he left everything behind, rose up and began to follow Him. And there was such a transformation in his life that he gave a big reception in verse 29 for the Lord in his house. And he brought his friends. And the only friends he had were tax collectors and sinners. And so the house was filled with a whole lot of outcasts. And the Pharisees and the scribes again predictably began grumbling and His disciples saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax gatherers and sinners?" And Jesus uses this occasion to teach the very basic principle of His ministry. "It is not those--verse 31--who are well, who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance."

In other words, I can't do anything with people who don't know they're sick. I can't do anything with people who don't know they're sinners. And as long as you think you're well, I cannot help you. And as long as you think you're righteous, I cannot help you. But those who are sick and know it and those who are sinful and acknowledge it, I have come to assist them, to offer them salvation. Jesus was particularly gracious in choosing this outcast Matthew to be a part of His own disciples and then using that opportunity of Matthew's joy in calling together all of his friends to articulate to the leaders of Israel His heart for those who were lost.

Luke again in chapter 7 verse 29 says, "And when all the people and the tax gatherers heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John." And again we see tax collectors again as the audience who are so responsive to the truth that our Lord brings to bear about salvation.

Chapter 18, do you remember this wonderful account? Verse 10, the parable our Lord taught them, a parable about trusting in self-righteousness. "Two men went to the temple to pray. One a Pharisee, the other a tax gatherer. The Pharisee stood, was praying thus to himself, God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people, swindlers, unjust, adulterers," that's the kind of people that would be categorized as sinners, "or even like this-- and here's the worst--tax gatherer. I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of all that I get." In other words, he's telling God how good he is and he's telling God how thankful he is that he doesn't need God. "But the tax gatherer standing some distance away was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breasts saying, God, be merciful to me the sinner," as if he's the only one. "I tell you, Jesus said, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted." And so the Lord even in a parable uses another tax collector as an illustration of one who embraces true salvation because he embraces the reality of his sinfulness and the need for the mercy of God.

So, Jesus continually ministered to the outcast tax collectors and sinners. Now go back to chapter 15. On this occasion they were gathered around Him as they often did to listen to what He had to say. They were obviously aware of their sins socially and they identified with the seeking heart of Christ. In fact, Luke says in chapter 7 verse 34 that the common sort of epithet thrown at Jesus was

that He was a friend of tax gatherers and sinners. He was a friend of tax gatherers and sinners.

See, all of this fits together in Luke's mind that He came to seek and save the lost. And while all men are lost, not all men knew that or not all men were willing to acknowledge that. But when they were, He became the friend, the seeking Savior with the heart for the lost. On the other side, verse 2, the Pharisees and the scribes grumbling saying, "This man receives sinners and eat with them." And they set themselves in contrast. They had no heart for the outcast, no heart for the sinner, no heart for the lost at all. They are in stark contrast to the character of Christ, stark contrast to the heart of God.

Now this is the audience. The Pharisees and the scribes on the one hand grumbling that He even eats with these sinners and tax gatherers. And the tax gatherers and sinners on the other hand. And He teaches them three parables...very simple, very straightforward, not to be misunderstood.

Parable number one, and they all have the same basic point. Number one, verse 3. "He told them this parable saying, What man among you if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. 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 which was lost."

The idea of verse 4 is the phrase "what man among you if.." and so forth, the idea is that no one would do any other than this. You all know you would do this. If you were a shepherd and you had a hundred sheep but you lost one of them, you would leave the ninety and nine that were safe in the fold and you would go out to find that one lost sheep. Every shepherd would do that. It was not only a matter of duty, it was a matter of affection. Over a period of time, those sheep would be known to the shepherd, known by name. As each night he examined them when they came back into the fold he would come to know each and every one. And when one was lost, the shepherd would go to find that one.

And then in verse 5, after having found it, he lays it on his shoulders. And the shepherd would take the belly of the sheep and pull it against his neck, pull the forelegs in and tie them up in a little knot and off he would go carrying his sheep back to the fold. And it says in verse 6, "When he came home, he called together his friends and neighbors in order that they might have a celebration saying to them, Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep which was lost."

The parable only has one basic point, the joy of the shepherd who sought and found the lost sheep. That's as patently obvious as it can be. His friends are called into the picture in order that you and I might understand the tremendous breadth of joy and depth of emotion the shepherd is feeling. He can't celebrate alone. It's too thrilling, it's too wonderful. It's not something he can quietly say in his heart, "Isn't that nice, isn't that wonderful that that's happened." He has to call together a large group of people for a great celebration because his joy is so profound.

And so, the sum of it all comes in verse 7. Here's the application. "I tell you that in the same way there will be joy," and I think it's best not to say "more joy," it's best to translate it without the word "more" which was added, and if you're going to add a word, add the word "rather" at the end of the phrase, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents

rather than over ninety- nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

In other words, there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents to the extent that God calls for a celebration. Now what does this tell us? This tells us that God is that seeking shepherd whose desire to find that sheep is fulfilled in the finding but the joy is so great that he can't contain it himself and it must be shared. And it becomes the joy of heaven. What a tremendous truth. The emphasis again is on the seeking heart of God who seeks until He finds that one that is lost and then whose rejoicing cannot even be contained until it is spread throughout the angels of heaven. What a tremendous thought.

It's not that God is up there in heaven working out the salvific transaction, if you want to put it in technical terms, and sort of writing down, "Well, there's another conversion, that's nice. And there's another conversion." It is the idea that God in the deepest part of His nature so longs for the soul of a lost man and a lost woman that He pursues that to the degree that having found that person the celebration, heaven itself, is barely big enough, we might say, to contain.

The seeking heart of God, that's the point. God goes after the sinners. God is not like Pharisees and scribes. He doesn't grumble about sinners. He doesn't despise sinners. He loves sinners. He doesn't seek to keep them away, He seeks to bring them in.

And then second parable starts in verse 8, the lost coin. The first parable, the lost sheep, the second is the lost coin. It's the same emphasis. "Or what woman," this is just an obvious thing, something that's axiomatic, "what woman, if she has ten silver coins," and that would be one day's wage, about equal in value to the Roman denarius. "If she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, doesn't light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?" I mean, the obvious idea of that question is no woman, I mean, every woman who lost a full day's wage somewhere would do all of that. Normally floors were made of dirt and that coin could easily find its way under some surface dirt. And she would be sweeping and moving that dust and dirt around until she found that coin. And it was such a wonderful thing to find it, it was so valuable, notice verse 9, when she has found it, she doesn't quietly stick it back in her purse, she calls together her friends and neighbors saying, "Rejoice with me for I have found the joy which I had lost."

In other words, she can't contain the celebration in her own heart, she has to pull her friends in because the joy is so unbounded. That's the same idea as the first one. The shepherd found the sheep because he sought the sheep and rejoiced with all who would rejoice with him. The woman found the coin because she sought the coin and rejoiced with all who would rejoice with her.

The application again comes in verse 10, "In the same way, I tell you," now follow this, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Why? Because that touches most deeply the heart of God who seeks to save those who are lost.

Now what does it mean "joy in the presence of the angels of God?" It doesn't actually say "joy among the angels," it doesn't say that it's the "joy of the angels," it says there's joy in the presence of the angels of God. Whose joy is it? Well, it's my conviction that it's the joy of the triune God who exists in the presence of the holy angels. It's the joy of God, it's the joy of the seeking God who dwells in the presence of angels. And, of course, the angels share in the celebration. The emphasis in both of these parables is the joy of God, the joy of God shared by all who are in His presence, all who know

His heart and rejoice with Him. But it's the joy of God over the salvation of a soul.

Beloved, you must understand this, that God does not deal with the salvation of a soul with the kind of indifference that we usually deal with it. It is not a matter of divine transaction and accounting and little more. It is not God just keeping books on who's in and who's out. It is God weeping over the lost and it is God exalting over the found. You and I are capable as human beings of knowing the wide-range of emotion because we are created in the image of a God whose pain is profoundly deep over men's lostness and whose joy is infinitely high when they are redeemed.

In Isaiah 62 verse 5, the Bible says, "And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you." And the Scripture picks out the highest human joy, that of a bridegroom and a bride and says God has such exaltation and joy over you. In Jeremiah 32:41 God says, "And I will rejoice over them to do them good and I will faithfully plant them in this land." And then I love this, "With all My heart and with all My soul." God rejoices over us with all His heart and all His soul. His joy is uncontained, as it were.

And on the other hand, what does Ezekiel tell us? Chapter 33 verse 11, "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." And then in chapter...earlier in chapter 18, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies." And so He says I cry to the wicked to turn from his ways and live.

It's as simple as John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." The seeking heart of God is all bound up in that love. And so like the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep and rejoices when he's found and the woman who seeks the lost coin and rejoices when its found, God is a seeking God whose joy is bound up in the finding of lost men and women.

And then the most magnificent of the three parables comes in verse 11. And I think very often the emphasis is shifted away from where it ought to be in this parable and let's see if we can't put it on line where the Spirit of God, I think, intends it in the context. It's the parable of the lost sons--plural. It is not the prodigal son, as if this is a story of one, it is two sons here and Jesus makes that clear in verse 11. "And He said, A certain man had two sons." This is not the story of one son, this is the story of two sons and this is the lost sons. "And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me...notice this...And he divided his wealth between them."

Now what that tells me is that son number two who doesn't speak, the older son is also there and is getting in on this as well. It seems to me that there is reason to believe that the brother was in the matter, the older brother was in the matter as well as the younger though the younger does the talking and the younger is the focus of the first half of the parable. The father divided the wealth between them. So both of them got what was coming to them.

Now what you need to know is that this is completely unheard of in the Middle East in that culture. And even today, in the more primitive Middle Eastern cultures, this is continually unheard of. For a son to go to his father and demand his inheritance on the spot is tantamount to verbalizing your wish that your father would be dead. And when looked at from the viewpoint of Middle Eastern culture, a father to be self-respecting in the community would refuse such a request and punish the sons who asked for it. To go to your own father and tell him to give you what your going to get when he dies now is the equivalent of saying, "I wish you were dead." And there are a lot of folks who wish it but

not so many who say it.

But it's incredible to see the graciousness of this father. He's a loving father. And he does an unprecedented thing, he gives them their inheritance. He divides it between them. And so you have the two sons, the younger speaks for them, they both receive their inheritance. And then the narrative of the parable follows the younger son. Verse 13, they have received their inheritance, "And not many days later," some period of time passes, the younger son realizes he's got all that he's got and so he gathers everything together and decides to go on a journey into a distant country. And there he squandered his estate with loose living.

He takes all that he has and goes off to live his wild life. "And when he had spent everything," verse 14 says, "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be in need." The Lord constructs the parable now. The young man goes off, spends his entire fortune and then a famine hits. When there's a famine, that means that if you happen to be ne'er do well, if you happened to be a beggar, if you have nothing to provide for yourself and you've wasted your fortune, you're dependent on begging for other people to give you what you need, but when a famine comes, they barely have enough for themselves and so beggars are out. And so he began to be in need.

He went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. The best he could do was feed pigs. Of course, this would be absolutely horrendous to a Jew to imagine having to work with that most unclean of all animals in Jewish ceremonial law, and yet that's where this young man winds up...from the father's house through the riotous living, out the other end into absolute poverty and now feeding pigs.

"And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating and no one was giving anything to him." He was so hungry he wanted to eat the pig slop. Apparently couldn't bring himself to do it and he couldn't get any food anywhere else. He was in a situation of absolute starvation, reduced to feeding pigs and the only thing on his menu was pig slop and he just couldn't endure a diet of that.

So, that's the devastation of this first son. He squandered everything he had. Turned his back on all his privileges. Turned his back on the love of his father. Grabbed all that the father could possibly provide him of earthly substance and wasted it foolishly and left with nothing comes to his senses in verse 17. And it says, "When he came to his senses he said, How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread but I am dying here with hunger?"

The first thing he does is express the sorrow over his human circumstance. He starts out with what we could call it a felt need, a psychological emotional physical felt need. He is in a very dire situation. And he will die in that situation if it is not remedied. But he doesn't stay with just his situation. Out of his situation comes the beginnings of repentance because he takes the responsibility for being in that situation. Verse 18, "I will get up," and this is a soliloquy, planning his speech, "I will get up and go to my father and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight."

He says I'm going to go back and I'm going to confess my sin first against heaven--that means I've sinned against God. He's aware of his degeneracy. He's aware of his condition. And he's aware that it was caused by his sin. He has sinned against his father when he says "in your sight," he has

sinned against his father with his thanklessness, with his ingratitude. He has sinned against his father with his riotous living, violating the way that he had been brought up. But more than that, he has sinned against heaven. He has sinned against God. Heaven is just a metonym for God. He knows that he has sinned against God. He sees beyond his offended human father to the offended God whose law requires a man to honor his father, whose law requires a man to live a righteous life. And he knows he has not only offended his early father, but he has offended God Himself.

So, here is a man who moves from a felt need to a recognition that his degenerate condition is directly related not only to a sin against his father but sin against God. And he says I'm going to go back to my father. He makes the right resolution.

But notice verse 20. He got up and came to his father. He put feet to that resolution. A lot of people say they're going to do something, don't do it. I see this as the real action of repentance. Repentance is to turn around and go the other way, and that's exactly what he did. Now remember in verse 19 he said I'm not worthy to be called your son...and he manifested humility. It's just what Jesus said about...you remember...in chapter 18 the publican beating on his breast who was so humble he wouldn't lift his eyes up and even look at God. And the Lord said, you remember, he would go home justified for whoever exalts himself will be abased, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Here's the classic parable that picks up on the same idea. Here was a man who started from a felt need, came to the place where he recognized the sinfulness of his sin. He sees himself with a beatitude attitude, he's a beggar in spirit. He's in poverty, spiritually bankrupt. Not only that, not only is he mourning over his sin, mourning over his spiritual poverty, he's poor in spirit, he is mourning over sin, but he is meek, he is humble and it is the humble who are exalted.

I'm no more worthy to be called your son...just put me on the bottom rung of the service ladder. Let me be a slave. That's a submissive spirit. He puts himself back under the authority of his father, in a sense, he submits to the sovereignty of his father, he submits to his father's will and says, "I'll be your slave."

And you can see that this is the kind of thing that is the awakening of true repentance. It goes from a felt need to a recognition of sin, from a recognition of sin on the human level to a recognition that sin violates God. From that point to a sense of humiliation, of meekness of mourning over that sin, a sense of unworthiness. And if true repentance is really at work, all of that picks up and turns its back on sin and walks the right direction. And that's exactly what this young man did in the parable. He got up and he started toward his father.

But here's the heart of the whole parable, and this often gets missed because we focus too much on the sons when we ought to focus on the father because this whole parable is illustrating the seeking God, just as parable one and two did. Notice this, "But while he was still a long way off," no sinner on his own can approach near to God. In fact, in the terms of Romans 3:11 no man even seeks after God. It's not until God begins the work in the heart that the sinner even begins to initially seek. But the seeking sinner will always be seeking afar off unless God, the seeking God comes to that sinner. And you see it while the sinner is still a long way off, his father saw him. How did he see him? I'll tell you how, I believe the father was out there every day doing what? Looking for him; morning, noon and night, watching into the distance from some high point on the ground to see if indeed his son might be coming back. And here is the picture of the seeking father. He sees that son a long way off and a father knows his son, even at a distance. And he feels compassion. And here, beloved, is the heart of God. It is not a dispassionate God that we serve, it is a God of great compassion. And his

heart is wrenched for the son and he doesn't stand there coldly saying, "I'm going to wait till he gets here and wait till I give him a piece of my mind." But rather he ran and kept on embracing him and kept on fervently kissing him. This is God, this is the seeking God.

The coin didn't seek the lady and the sheep didn't seek the shepherd and the sinner really can't seek God in and of himself, but there is a degree to which this parable gives us a fuller picture than the first two, because the son does respond to the prompting work of the Holy Spirit in the parable. That's the picture being given. And he does begin to move back in the right direction. He turns from sin toward God, but would be lost, hopelessly lost even in that if it weren't for the seeking God who ran to him afar off, kept on embracing and kissing him.

What a seeking God, what a seeking father, what a seeking Savior we have. And this is the heart of the parable. And so while he's hugging and kissing his son, the son said to him, "Father," and here he gives him the speech he rehearsed, "I have sinned against heaven," that's first, "I have violated God, and in your sight, I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And apparently before he can say "I will come and be one of your hired servants," the father said to the slaves, "Quickly," and takes over the conversation. I see confession of sin here. I see a humble heart. I see a mourning over sin. It starts with a felt need. It starts with a degeneration and dissipation, but it moves from the low pit of sin to the high point of repentance. He comes back, in a sense, knowing he's a sinner, sorry for his sin, wanting to leave his sin behind him, reaching out for his father, wanting to submit to the father and serve him. It's all here.

But the father stops him. And I love this, he says, "I've got my plans for you." He doesn't say first you're going to be flogged and then you're going to be....you're going to be sent out to live in some kind of out of the way place until you prove yourself. No. He is not only a seeking father, he is a loving, forgiving, gracious generous father and his joy is like the joy of the shepherd who found the sheep, the joy of the woman who found the coin and so the father says, "We've got to have a celebration," Forget about the fact that he wanted me dead, forget about the fact that he wasted what I've spent my life time accumulating for him, forget about the fact that he lived in sin and immorality, forget about the fact that he wound up feeding unceremonially...ceremonially unclean pigs, forget about all of that, forget about the fact that he comes back empty handed with nothing to offer but his sin and regret, forget about that, we're going to have a celebration. That's the heart of God, my friend. Forget what he did in the past. Quickly, he says verse 22, bring out the best robe, put it on him, put a ring on his hand, sandals on his feet, bring the fattened calf, kill it and let us eat and be merry. Why? "For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again, he was lost and has been found, and they began to be merry."

Do you see the point? The parables all have that same common theme: a seeker who finds and rejoices. And the seeker is God...the seeker is God. So much for the younger son.

The narrative then takes up the older son, verse 25. The older son had received his inheritance, too. But he stayed around the house, around the place. His older son was in the field and when he came and approached the house he heard music and dancing. I mean, they got that party going real fast, before he could even get in from the field, before the day even ended. And he hears this dancing and music and he summoned one of the servants, began inquiring what these things might be.

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." They're having a celebration because your sinful wretched

vile polluted brother who lived in dissipation has come back. This is so emblematic, isn't it, of the tax collectors and the sinners. The first son is so illustrative of the outcasts. And son number two is definitely an illustration of the Pharisees.

Verse 28, "But he became...what?...angry, was not willing to go in." He's not about to eat with a sinner. "And his father came out and began entreating him. Please come, please join the celebration." Listen, that son had not the heart of his father. That son rejoiced not in the salvation of a lost and outcast son because he had not the heart of his father. He did not love his father, for if he'd have loved his father he would have entered into his father's joy. Love does that.

"But he answered and said to his father," verse 29, "Look, for so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours," sounds like the rich young ruler. "And yet you have never given me a kid," he means a goat, fattened calf, "that I might be merry with my friends."

Oh boy, get out the violins. "But when this son of yours came who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him." He's the Pharisees. He doesn't know the heart of his father. He has no compassion for the lost. He too is a lost son. And the father seeks him as well. In verse 31 he said to him, "My child, you have always been with me and all that is mine is yours, have I ever said you couldn't have everything I possess? But we had to be merry and rejoice for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found."

But self-righteous people cannot tolerate the forgiveness of sinners...especially flagrant sinners. And so in this young man there's not the heart of his father. He had no love for his father. He served out of duty. Verse 29, "For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected..." it was all duty, it was just perfunctory duty.

And so, there's no repentance. There's no confession of sin. There's no submission to his father's will. There's no entering into his father's joy. He doesn't know the heart of his father. The first son in the story sees his sin, feels the sorrow, repents, humbles himself, receives the grace of his father, enters in the joy of his father and is restored to sonship. The second son, no repentance, no confession of the cold deadness of his own heart. And what Luke is telling us as he gives us these three parables of our dear Lord is that the Lord seeks and to save those who recognize their lostness. And so very often it is the irreligious, it is the dissipated, it is the violent sinners who understand their sinfulness while the people who are up to their proverbial ears in religion and self-righteous achievement never recognize that. But even for them, the father says you've always been around and what is mine has always been available for you.

The heart of God is to seek and save the lost. The lost who come to Christ come in a recognition of sin, in a humiliation, in a repentant attitude, in a desire to submit to the leading and guiding and sovereign work of the Lord God and would be happy to be nothing but a slave. Now that is the meaning in parable form of this statement, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost."

Now our Lord will illustrate that verse 10 of Luke 19 with the story of Zacchaeus. The story of Zacchaeus is a story of seeking and saving an outcast, tax collector. And that's what we're going to look at next week. Fascinating, fascinating story. Let's bow together in prayer.

We are reminded, Lord, of the words of the Apostle Paul who said Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief. We are reminded that Jesus said He had come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. We see it in the story of the younger son, that those who are found and those who are saved and those delivered and redeemed are those who recognize their sin, who know they're lost and cut off from You. Father, I would pray today that if there's anyone in our fellowship this morning who is estranged from you, who is lost, ruined, marred, living in imminent danger of eternal damnation, standing on the brink of a Christless eternity in hell, O Father, I pray this day that You would seek and save that soul, that You would by Your sovereign work turn the heart from sin to Yourself, that You would do a gracious work of repentance, a work which could never be done in the flesh, that You would bring Your Spirit to cause mourning over sin, meekness, humiliation and a desire to be right with You, to serve You, to honor You. And, Father, we thank You that the way back is made possible because of the death of Jesus Christ, because He paid the penalty for every sin we can be received, given a robe, a ring, and a feast as if there was no sin in the past at all because Jesus died bearing that sin. O blessed God, thank You for this great reality. Thank You that You have sought to save sinners and that You sent Christ to go to the cross to make that possible. We pray today that many will come turning from their sin under the prompting gracious sovereign work of the Holy Spirit to embrace the Father through Christ, the Father who ever seeks those that are lost. Father, do Your work in every life and be pleased with those of us who are already Your children as we offer You our faithful service in humble gratitude for what You've given us, even when we wasted the resources before we came to Christ, even though we sinned against You, we bless You for saving us and we seek to honor You in everything we do.

While your heads are bowed for just a closing moment, if you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ and you see yourself as that sinner lost and undone and cut off and in a far place, unforgiven, without resources, and you long to run into the arms of God, be forgiven, be given a place in His house, His Kingdom, why don't you come to Him, just trust Christ as your Lord and Savior, the one who died and rose again for you, give yourself to God. If you know someone who's not a Christian, pray that the seeking Father will run and embrace them even as He has those of us all of whom are so unworthy. Identify some people specifically and begin to pray for their salvation. This is the heart of God and should be our heart as well.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2017 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).