

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Licentious Son

Scripture: Luke 15:11-16

Code: 91-1

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We turn now in the Word of God to Luke 15. Our text this morning is Luke chapter 15, and we begin in verse 11 with the very familiar parable of our Lord, probably His best known and most memorable parable, called the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." Charles Dickens said this was the greatest short story ever written, and so did Ralph Waldo Emerson, a couple of gentlemen who could spin a fair yarn themselves. It is likely the most rich and inexhaustible of Jesus' parables, and yet at the same time a child can grasp its basic truth.

When we come to a parable like this, it's really critical for us to remember that the Bible is a Middle Eastern book. It is an ancient Middle Eastern book. Its truths are set in a culture that is very distant from our own. We live in the western world a couple of thousand years after this, have little first-hand experience with life in the Middle East, either ancient or modern. And it's all too easy for us to rip this story out of its context, to transport it into our modern world and make some applications that are minimalist, at best.

This deserves more than a bare-bones treatment. It is not a story that can be superficially understood as to its richness, and therefore its message. There are nuances, there are subtleties, there are cultural attitudes and features here that give it its full meaning. And remember, whatever the Bible meant to the people to whom it was written, it means today. Whatever Jesus meant to the people to whom He spoke is exactly what His words mean today.

And one of the sad realities of our modern world is that we're in a hurry to read the Bible and apply the Bible without ever interpreting it. And in an effort which is rather relentless to try to update the Bible, we ignore its original context, in a hurry to push it into the twenty-first century.

But if we are to draw out of this what God intended us to know and what He intended to reveal for our edification, it is critical that we understand that we must hear it the way the audience of Jesus heard it. There were in their minds ingrained ideas, ingrained cultural attitudes, ingrained patterns, unspoken feelings and sensibilities that existed in the Middle-Eastern peasant village life. And these are the things that illuminate the story. These are the things that make it live. And these are the things that will allow us to live in it.

Christ spoke to a Middle-Eastern peasant people. The gospels basically address people in that context. Even most of the educated people of that time would have their root in simple, agrarian village life. What went on in their culture and their social life, and what was imbedded for generations in their sensibilities much still exist even today in Middle-Eastern peasant life. There were things felt but never spoken. There were deep attitudes that are never articulated, not even consciously apprehended. They have been in the subconscious for so long.

And if we are to grasp the mastery of this great story and all its spiritual meaning, we've got to go back and do the best we can to put ourselves in that very place and time. We need to place ourselves in the attitudes, the expectations of a Middle Eastern peasant village culture. Then we can begin to find the richness of this story being illuminated to our minds.

Now before we look at the story, a bit of background so that we know where we are. Christ is on His way to Jerusalem the last months of His life. He is intending to offer Himself as God's perfect sacrifice for sin, die on the cross, and then on the following Sunday rise again from the dead, having accomplished our redemption. He has been ministering now for nearly three years, and preaching the message of the kingdom of God, and repentance, and calling men and women to enter into the kingdom of God through repentance and faith in Him as the Messiah and the Lord God.

He has developed some relentless enemies, the Pharisees and the scribes. They are basically the architects of the popular religion of Judaism at the time. They have their influence in the synagogues, which are the local assemblies of Jewish people where they come together to be taught. They are the primary influencing force. They are legalistic. They are corrupt inwardly. They are hypocritical. They are hostile to Jesus. And yet they have the greatest amount of influence, and so you have basically a populous that for the most part is either hostile or indifferent to Jesus under their influence. And that ultimately comes down upon His head as they scream for His blood in Jerusalem and take away His life.

The resentment of the Pharisees and the scribes is due to the fact that Jesus directly confronted them on their hypocrisy. He identified them as self-righteous and not truly righteous. He identified them as not truly understanding the Scripture or the will of God. He told them they did not know God. They did not know the true way of salvation. He told them they were excluded from the kingdom of God because they were inwardly corrupt, and they were headed to divine judgment. This is not what they wanted to hear.

And though He said it with compassion and mercy and grace, and though He said it repeatedly in all kinds of settings, no matter how He said it, they hated it. And so wanting to attack Jesus back, they came up with the worst possible thing they could say about Him, and that is that He did what He did by the power of Satan. The very opposite of representing God, they said He represents the devil

himself and what He says is demonic and hellish. That was their conviction and so that is the lie that they spread throughout the land.

Any way and every way they could find to affirm that lie, they did so. And one way they found apparently to be very effective was to say to the people, "Look with whom Jesus associates. He doesn't associate with God's people. He associates with the devil's people. He associates with tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals, the general category called sinners." And whenever they could identify Jesus as associating with sinners, they loved to do that as a way to discredit Him, to affirm that He was comfortable with Satan's people and uncomfortable with the people of God, whom they believed themselves to be.

And so that is the occasion that precipitates the stories that Jesus tells in Luke 15. In verse 1 it says, "All the tax gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him." They came because, as you noted at the end of chapter 14, the last statement, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." They were willing to listen, and so they came. "And both the Pharisees and the scribes - " who were the theological experts in the Pharisees' movement " - began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' " And, of course, eating with someone was tacit affirmation and approval.

And so they were outraged. They would not associate with these kinds of people. They would not eat with these people, by any means. They kept themselves aloof from all of these kinds of people in some self-designed effort to protect their own imagined purity.

Despite the miracles of Jesus - which were inescapable, they never did try to deny them - despite His ample evidence of His deity, despite the power and the clarity and the transforming nature of His words, they kept coming back to the fact that He was satanic, and it was evident on this occasion because He was associating with the people who belonged to the devil.

He not only violated the traditions of Judaism, violated the customs of the Pharisees and the scribes, He not only had no regard for their treatment of the sabbath or their other rules, but especially He associated Himself with the unrighteous outcasts. And so they brought this up again here as they had in 5:29-32, same complaint.

Now this sets off an answer from our Lord. And the answer is a pretty simple answer. "You don't get it, do you? The reason I associate with these sinners is because I have come to seek and to save that which is lost," as He says explicitly in Luke 19:10. "I do this because it is the Father's joy. It is God's joy to save lost sinners." And He goes on to tell a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep, and he lost one, and went and found it, brought the sheep back. And says, "What is the point of the story?" Verse 7, "I tell you in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance." And that is a sarcastic rebuke of the Pharisees themselves who thought they were righteous and needed no repentance. Heaven has no

joy in you. Heaven's joy is in the recovery of a lost sinner who repents.

And then He told a second story about a woman who had ten silver coins, and lost one, and went on a search until it was found. And again in verse 10, "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

What He is saying to them is, "You are so far from God, you don't even understand what makes God have joy. You don't understand what causes God to be content, satisfied, and joyful. It is the recovery of sinners. You are so far from knowing God."

And that, of course, then leads to the third story, which is the main parable. We have seen the recovery of a lost sheep and a lost coin. And here is the recovery of a lost son. But this story is intended to demonstrate the same thing, the joy of God over the recovery of a lost sinner. But this story goes even beyond that and it identifies the nature of repentance.

Repentance has been mentioned in verse 7 and mentioned in verse 10, but never defined. In this story, it is fully defined, and for the first time in this story, the Pharisees and the scribes actually appear. They are a character in this story and we see them in all their ugliness, and so did they see themselves. And that's the surprise ending of the story.

Up to that point, they were pretty much in agreement with the story. And that was always Christ's approach, to get them to buy into the story in terms of interest and understanding, and then to get them to understand the ethical issues in the story, because they celebrated their own high level of ethics. And then to take their own ethical understanding, and turn it on them, and make the theology of the story like a knife that penetrated their sinful hearts. All of that happens, and a lot more, in this story.

The first two stories, about the sheep and the coin, emphasize God as the seeker, the one who finds, and the one who rejoices. But the third story looks not so much at the divine side, but at the human side: Sin, repentance, recovery, and rejection. This is a dramatic story. This is a moving story. All of it is deeply interesting and impactful on the thinking of anyone who is gripped by divine truth.

Now the story doesn't contain everything that needs to be said about salvation. It's not the whole of salvation theology. But it does lead us to the cross, which is yet to happen, because it's a story of reconciliation, and there is no reconciliation apart from the death of Christ, who having paid the penalty in full for the sinner provides reconciliation. But the cross is not in the story, it's yet to come. And so this is not a full theology of salvation, but it deals with some of the essential elements of sin, and recovery, and rejoicing, and rejection.

Now, it falls into three characters: The younger son, the father, and the older son. And really it should be divided that way. I would like to be able to divide it so conveniently into three parts. This has been a goal of my life ever since I started preaching, a goal that I never achieved. So we will take it as it comes.

But we begin with the younger son, the younger son. And as we open the story of the younger son, I want to take you to two things to think about. First, a shameless request, and then a shameless rebellion. Verse 11, “And He said, ‘A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.” ’ ” We’ll stop there for a moment.

The first son is not the only character. In verse 11, you have the man and both sons. That’s why I call it “a tale of two sons.” It’s not really the tale of one son. It’s the tale of two sons, and the climax of the whole story indicates that it is the other son, the one we don’t think about, that is really the main objective in the story. But we call this younger son “the prodigal son.” And I suppose that you - if I asked you what “prodigal” meant, would probably want to look for a dictionary to find out exactly what “prodigal” means. So I can fill in a little for you.

It’s a word, it’s an Old English word. We don’t use it much. It basically meant “spend thrift.” And you know what that word means, somebody who is wasteful, a person who is senselessly, extravagantly, self-indulgent. And that’s a great word for this first son. That’s why it’s lasted for so long. But it’s not a word that’s in the story anywhere. It’s just a word that in the original English versions fit well. The young man is the classic illustration of wasting your life, of extravagant self-indulgence. And that is why he is called “the prodigal son.”

But let’s look at the story and see that it’s really a story about two sons and a loving father. Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ ” When Jesus said that, you could imagine that the Pharisees and the scribes who were His only audience went, “Ah.” This is absolutely an outrageous statement. Now he’s likely not married because he wants to go and sow his wild oats, probably in his teens. He is utterly disrespectful toward his father. He lacks any love for his father whatsoever. There is not an ounce of gratitude in his heart for the legacy that generations of his family have provided for his father and one day for him.

In fact, the truth of the matter is for a son to say that in the sensibilities of the ancient Middle East in village life would be tantamount to saying, “Dad, I wish you were dead. You are in the way of my plans. You are a barrier. I want my freedom, I want my fulfillment, and I want out of this family now. I’ve got other plans. They don’t involve you. They don’t involve this family. They don’t involve this estate. They don’t involve this village. I want nothing to do with any of you. I want my inheritance now.” Which is equal to saying, “I wish you were dead.”

In a culture where honor was so important, in a culture based upon a ten commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," this had been embellished and improved on to the point where honoring your father was like at the top of the list of social life. And any son who made such a request - such a breath-taking request, such an outrageous request - from a healthy father probably relatively young is understood by everyone to be wishing his father was dead.

You see, the way it worked, you never got your inheritance until your father died. But to do this, to ask for it at this point, essentially was not only to affirm your father was dead, but was also to, on your own part, commit suicide, because anybody would expect that that kind of request of a father would be responded to with a slap across the face.

That was a typical Jewish gesture to show rebuke for such disdain on the part of a young son who had benefited from everything the family had, and probably all the accumulated riches of the generations before, and that's the way he treats his father? He would be slapped across the face with no small force, and then very likely he would be shamed publicly, and perhaps dispossessed of everything he had, and perhaps even considered as dead, and dismissed from the family.

That's how serious the breach was and that is why in verse 24 when he comes back, the father says, "This son of mine was dead." And he says it again in verse 32 to the older brother, "This brother of yours was dead." It was even customary in that time and place to hold an official ceremony, a funeral, if you will, for such insolence. And you were done, and you were out of the family, and you were dead. And the only way back in was some restitution, some way to earn your place back in the graces of the family for the dishonor you had brought.

The system was very clear to everybody. The father was at the head of the honor list, then came the older brother, then came the younger. This is shameless at its highest level. The lowest in the family, the lowest in the line of honor expressing aggravation, and irritation, and hatred about his father, that he's even still alive and standing in the way of him getting what he wants is the highest degree of shame imaginable. There was no way that Jesus could portray greater shame upon a person than that act. In the social structure of Israel, that was the supreme act of shame.

And his request, "Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me." Give it to me. He uses the word "estate." This is a word in the Greek, *ousias*, used only here, nowhere else in the New Testament, and it means "the goods, the property, the portion." He's asking for the material stuff: Land, animals, buildings, whatever of the family possessions he is entitled to get.

And in a two-brother family, according to Deuteronomy 21:17, the estate would be divided unequally. The older son gets double what the younger son gets. That means two-thirds go to the older son, one-third goes to the younger son. So whatever was one-third of everything that this family had is

what he wants. And they must have had a lot. They had servants, as we find out later in the story. They hired musicians and dancers for the party. They had hired men whom they employed outside their normal family servants. They had animals, including a fattened calf. And they must have had a substantial enough estate that he thought if he could get his third he could fund his rebellion pretty well.

But all he wanted was the *tsousias*, and that's a very important word because the normal word for inheritance is *klronomia*, that's the normal word. But listen carefully. When you use that word and you talk about inheritance, you're talking about everything that comes with the material. You're talking about the management of the estate. You're talking about leadership. You're talking about responsibility to provide the resources for the family. When you receive your inheritance from your father, you literally are receiving the responsibility to manage all the assets of the estate on behalf of the family present to add to that, and therefore build the estate for the family in the future.

So with the word "inheritance" comes responsibility, accountability for the future. He didn't want any of that, so he didn't use that word. Jesus put this word, *tsousias*, in his mouth, "I just want my stuff. I don't want leadership. I don't want responsibility. I don't want accountability. I don't want anything for the future. I'm not taking on any responsibility for this family now or ever again. I don't want to care for anyone. I just want my stuff." No leadership, no responsibility, no accountability, no part of the family, no part of the father's future.

All of this indicates that he is living under the father's authority very reluctantly. He is miserable. He wants freedom, independence. He wants distance. He wants to go as far away from all restraint, all accountability that he can. He doesn't want to obey his father. He doesn't want to be directed by his father. He doesn't want to have to answer to his father. He wants nothing to do with anybody who knows him. He wants out, but he wants out with all that he can get to finance his leaving.

Now a father could give gifts to his children. Any father in the Jewish culture at that time could give gifts to the children as he wished. He could assign also their portions of the estate, at some point he could say, "This is the two-thirds you're going to get as the older son. This is the one-third that you're going to get as a younger son." And even if he did that assignment, they could never take possession until he died, because in that culture of honor the father was in charge until he died. He never relinquished that to his children. So though he would say, "This will be yours," he wouldn't say, "This is yours. Take it over now." He would always be the one responsible.

And if he did apportion to them and say, "Now, I want you to start to learn to manage your area, and to manage this area," according to the custom, he would have access to everything that was earned as they managed their estates. So he kept a strong and firm hand. But the son is not asking for that. He's not asking to know now what he's going to get in the future. He's asking to have now what he should wait for after his father dies.

The village would probably get word of this, circulate around a village typically. They would expect the father to be angry, ashamed, dishonored. They would expect him to be furious with his son. They would expect him to slap the boy across the face, to rebuke him, to shame him, to punish him, to dismiss him from the family, and perhaps even to hold a funeral.

But this is the first surprise in the story. Go back to verse 12. "And he divided his wealth between them." He divided his wealth. You know what the word "wealth" is in the Greek? "Bios," life, biology, this is their life. This is what the family's life for generations has produced. This is his living. This is his source of livelihood. So he is saying he divided it.

Well, some of the Pharisees and Sadducees or scribes probably thought, "Well, yeah, he's just telling them that, you know, 'this is what you're going to get. This is going to be yours. This is going to be yours. And you can begin to take responsibility for what's going to be yours now, and I'll be there to oversee it.'" Maybe that's what he meant. He was just divvying it up according to Deuteronomy 21:17, one-third, two-thirds.

And yet there would be a surprise at this point. This would be pretty shocking because of the way in which this was requested. If the father had done it of his own will, because he had such respect for his sons, and to trust in his sons, and love for his sons, then it would be understood. But to this kind of son with this kind of request, for a father to do this was very shocking stuff, and this would cause another gasp from the Pharisees.

Rather than strike him across the face for his insolence, the father grants him what he wants. He extends to him this freedom because he is willing to endure the agony of rejected love. And this is the agony that's the most painful of any personal agony, the agony of rejected love. The greater the love, the greater the pain when that love is rejected. This is God. This is God giving the sinner his freedom. There's no law in the customs of Israel that would forbid a father to do this. He's not doing this because he thinks this is best. He's giving the sinner his freedom. And the sinner's not really breaking the law, but he is demonstrating the absence of a relationship. And that's the point.

The sinner has no relationship to God whatsoever. Doesn't love God, doesn't care about God, wants nothing to do with God, nothing to do with the family of God, wants nothing to do with the future of the family of God, wants no accountability to God, wants no interest in God, doesn't want to answer to God, doesn't want to submit to God, doesn't want any kind of relationship at all. In fact, has none. And God, in the agony of rejected love, lets the sinner go. It's like Romans 1, "He gave them over, gave them over, gave them over."

Now notice back at verse 12 again that he divided his wealth between them. We still have two boys in this story at this point, because once it was divided then it was clear to the other brother what was

his. And so they both received their portions. Though I said this was rare and there was no law forbidding it, it was very, very unusual for this to happen, and it could never happen under these circumstances with that kind of son making that kind of request.

Jewish law did say - according to the Mishnah which is the codification of Jewish law - that if this was done, if a father decided to do this, the sons had to hold the property until the father died, and only then could they do with it what they pleased. Up until that time, the father still oversaw how they managed that property, and the father had a right to everything it produced in terms of income. But that certainly wouldn't suit the plans of the younger son. He wanted what he wanted and he wanted it now.

Well, step one was to get the father to split the estate. It didn't take long for step two, verse 13, "And not many days later." And this begins the second thing that I told you you'd have to think about in the story. First, the shameless request, and then a shameless rebellion. Just a few days, "not many days later." He didn't wait long. He couldn't wait. He's waited long enough. He's sick of being in the father's presence. He's sick of having any accountability or relationship with the family. He has no love for his father. He has absolutely no love for his older brother, either, and his older brother has no love for him.

And, by the way, as a footnote, the older brother has no love for the father, either. That's right. The older brother has no love for the father. In fact, when the boy comes home and the father is happy, the older brother is angry. He has no investment in the father's affections whatsoever. He is equally unloving, equally ungrateful, even though he stays home. He is the hypocrite in the house.

So the father basically has no relationship with either son. These are two kinds of people who have no relationship with God. One is irreligious and one is religious. One is as far away from God that he can get. The other is as close as he can be.

But what did the younger son want? "Not many days later - " it says " - the younger son gathered everything together." Literally that says "he turned it all into cash." He turned it all into cash. "I want out, nothing to do with you." Technically, by the way, he could sell the property. Once it was given to him, even though the father still had some oversight and could get the interest off it, and they couldn't actually take possession of it until the father died, there was a loophole, there was an out in the ancient tradition and that was this. He could sell it to somebody who would buy it, but not take it until the father died.

You say, "Well, that's a pretty hard sell, isn't it?" Not necessarily. He wants cash. He needs to find a buyer for his third of this estate, a buyer who will give him the cash now and not take possession until the father is dead. Now if you think that's unusual, just remember that every day of the world people are buying what are called "futures," commodities. And why would people buy something now that

they can't get until the future? Because they think the price might go up. So you hedge against the future by paying the purchase price now, even though you can't take possession until the future. This is buying futures, this is hedging against the future.

And you know the price was going to be good because you got a desperate seller. Nothing more wonderful, right, when you're a buyer than a desperate seller. Somebody who wants out, who wants out fast. Not many days later, he wants to turn everything into cash. His property can be sold, which means buildings, land, animals, whatever it was, he gets the cash now. Whoever bought it can't take possession until the father dies.

And, of course, there are people who would be glad to do that because it's going to be a fire sale. The guy wants out, he wants out now. He takes a discounted price. And somebody is more than happy to hold onto the value of that property and wait the years until that man dies, and then take it and put it into his own family's estate in the future.

This is the foolishness of the sinner. He wants to get away from God. He wants to get away from God now. He wants no accountability to God. He sells cheap all of the opportunities that God has provided for him, all the good gifts, all the gospel opportunities, everything that's good that God has put into his world. All that goodness and forbearance of God that's meant to lead him into a relationship with God, he spurns and once he gets his cash, you see what happens in verse 13, "He went on a journey into a distant country."

"Distant" is the operative word. Get out, and get out fast, and get out far. Gentile land would be distant country. Any country outside Israel is Gentile land. He went to a Gentile land, which was a horror. This is another horror. How bad is this kid? This kid is as bad as anybody could be. You can't be worse than to scorn your father and dishonor your father. And you add to that materialistic greed. And you add to that selling off the generational family estate. And you add to that going into a Gentile land, as far away from anybody who knows you you can get, so nobody knows or cares what you do. Outrageous conduct.

And the family for sure then would have had a funeral in the village. He's gone and he's dead. It's over. Only could be restored now if he were to come back and repurchase the estate which he sold. He'd have to come back and buy it back.

By the way, just as a footnote, I asked the question when I'm going through this, where's the older son in this? Why doesn't he ever rise to the defense of the father's honor? Why doesn't he ever step up and protect the father? Why isn't there a verse in here about "But the older son went to the younger and rebuked him for dishonoring the father?" The answer, because he didn't love the father either. He was happy to get his share, stay home. Never came to the father's defense. He has no love for the father, as we shall see.

The whole scene is filled with shame. It's a totally dysfunctional family. A loving generous father who's provided massive gifts to two sons. One is a flagrant, rebellious, irreligious sinner; the other is a religious one who stayed home, but neither of them has any relationship to the father or to each other. They both hate each other and the father.

Well, the rebellion is on. And it tells us, back to verse 13, that when he got into the distant country, "he there squandered his estate with loose living." "Squandered" means to "scatter." He just threw it away, threw it away. Hence "prodigal," he wasted it. Loose living, reckless, wasteful living, zoe asts, a dissipated life, a debauched life, a dissolute life.

In fact, down in verse 30, his older brother says, "He devoured his wealth with harlots." Wow. Some people think that might just be a trumped up accusation by the older brother. But there is no older brother. This is only a story and the author of all of this is Jesus. And Jesus put that in the story because that's an accurate reflection of what He wants to convey the young man did.

What else would he do? Running as far as he could from all accountability, holding all his money intact, he goes into this far country trying to get away from any responsibility or accountability from his father, and he dissipates his life in an immoral fashion. He wastes it. "He trashed his life," we would say in the contemporary vernacular.

Now obviously this young son represents open sinners, the rebels, the dissolute, the profligate, the dissipated, the debauched, the immoral, those who make no pretense of faith in God, no pretense of love for God. This is those in verse 1, this is the tax gatherers and the sinners, the outcasts, the irreligious. And they run as far as they can from God because they have no love for Him and no relationship with Him. They don't want anything to do with His law, or His rule. They don't want any accountability to Him whatsoever. They don't darken the door of the church. They're not interested in exposing themselves to anybody's expectations.

But sin never works out the way it looks. Verse 14, "Now when he had spent everything." That kind of introduces the fact that when he arrived in the far country, he was the fat cat, the fair-haired boy, the new guy in town with the big bankroll. He's got his wad. He comes into town. He sets himself on the party trail and goes on a wild spree. Certainly collecting around him all kinds of people who wanted to cash in on his generosity, his foolish generosity. He surrounds himself with the riffraff, and the scum, and the lowlifes, and he runs out of money. He spent everything, verse 14 says, that's his fault. That's his fault.

But "a severe famine occurred in the country." That's not his fault, but that's how life is. Some things are your fault and some things are not. But the conflux of those things can be devastating. Life is like that. A severe famine occurred in the country. Now you wouldn't know what a severe famine was, and

neither would I. What is a severe famine? How do people act in a severe famine? Not a famine of a minor nature, “a severe famine,” our Lord says.

And I kind of wanted to see if I could understand what a famine is. And I found a description of a famine. This famine occurred back in the 1800s and a man wrote about it, and it's pretty characteristic of what goes on in a famine. This would be what would be happening in a village. This is what the sensibilities of the people listening to Jesus would understand. What is a famine? They would remember, for example, the times when Israel was under siege and women ate their afterbirth and even cannibalized their children. That's in the Old Testament. That's a famine.

But here's from the 1800s a description of a famine. The writer tells of children being sold into slavery to keep them from starving. He speaks of men found dead every morning on the streets. And when the numbers increased, the ruler of the city declared every man responsible for throwing the dead bodies in front of his house into the river. And not wanting to have all the dead bodies in front of their house, inhabitants of the city would drag the dead in front of other people's houses.

Every morning quarrels would ring out across the city as men fought over where the dead bodies really died. Small merchants had to keep hippopotamus hide whips nearby to drive off the maddened beggars who would attack them bodily and ravish the little they had in their shops. Small merchants with their wares on the street would throw themselves across their wares as the miserable wretches came by to steal something to eat. Men venturing out at night unarmed were attacked and eaten. Straying animals were killed and eaten raw.

Shoe leather, rotten flesh and garbage were all devoured. They ate palm trees. Families in the village seeing death on them bricked up the doors of their houses and awaited death in a room to keep their own bodies from being devoured by hyenas. Entire villages were wiped out in this manner. This is a famine.

Something like that would be the picture in the minds of the listeners of Jesus when He told the story. You're talking about a level of desperation that's beyond anything that we can conceive of. So now he's made some bad decisions himself, the worst possible and circumstances have made it even more severe. This is life at its lowest, folks. And the Pharisees and the scribes listening to the story now are feeling the weight of the horror of the life of this young man.

From a wonderful place under a loving father in a generous environment, he has come to this. It is life at its lowest in the pits at the most desperate. He has no family. He has nobody left. He's in a foreign land, nowhere to turn. All his resources are gone. He is destitute. He is on skid row. He is penniless. He is alone. The party is over, for sure.

But he's still not ready to go home. That's a big one. Still not ready to fully humble himself, to eat crow, to go back, to be shamed, to be humiliated, to face his father, and the resentment of his older brother for having wasted the substance. The older brother knows that once the thing was split, he no longer could draw resources from the other third, and therefore it would cheat him out of what he would get, and that elevates his hatred. He doesn't want to face any of that. He doesn't want to face the town. He doesn't want to face any of it.

So he does what people tend to do when they hit bottom. It says at the end of verse 14, "He began to be in need." For the first time, he can't supply what he needs. This is the beginning. And like typical sinners, he comes up with the first plan. This is his plan A. "He went, attached himself to one of the citizens of that country." First thing he said is, "I've got to get a job. I've got to pick myself up."

This is typical of the sinner. Runs from God, goes out, lives a dissolute, rebellious life, sins up a storm, winds up in the pit, winds up with absolutely nothing, is completely bankrupt, bare. He's on skid row. He's walking the street. Has nothing, but he's going to pick himself up. I've got to get a job, and for the first time I have to work.

Didn't get what he wanted out of his little enterprise. He didn't get what he wanted out of his escapade. He forfeited the easy life. He left a loving father. He ended up with a hard, hard life. He wanted unrestrained pleasure. He wanted his lusts fulfilled without interruption and without rebuke. What he got was pain and unfulfillment, loneliness. He was actually facing death.

So, "he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country." "Citizen" is a word that refers to a privileged person. Not everybody was a citizen. That meant you were privileged and honored by the society, given a place on the city roll. He found somebody who had some means, a citizen, and he attached himself. That's a great word in the Greek, kolla, "to glue." He stuck himself to this guy.

I'm pretty sure that the implication here is that this wasn't the guy's idea. If you've ever traveled in the third world, if you ever travel in India, shaking the beggars is one of the greatest efforts you'll have. You just go out on the street and it isn't very long before they're hanging on your coat, pulling on your arm, grabbing at your pockets, and you've got to be protected, because you really can be totally overwhelmed. The level of desperation causes people to do this. And the picture here is of a man who is now a beggar. And so he finds a citizen who has some means, and he sticks to this guy to the point that the guy can't get rid of him. And finally it says in verse 15, "he sent him into his fields to feed pigs."

This isn't really a job. I mean, it's the lowest possible thing that anybody could ever do and as it turns out, it doesn't pay anything. But to get rid of the guy he says, "Go to the field and feed my pigs." And so desperate, he does it.

And this point the gasp is louder than ever. This is a Jewish boy feeding pigs in a Gentile land, serving a Gentile. Leviticus 11:7, Deuteronomy 14:8, other Old Testament passages indicate that Jews could not eat pork, unclean animals. And he ends up feeding pigs. "Go feed my pigs." This is lower than low can be.

But it's not all. Look at verse 16. So he goes, what else can he do? And he gets there and it says he was "longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating." Hey, did you ever try to crowd in with the pigs to get the slop? That's what it's saying. He was so hungry that he was not just feeding pigs and earning wages, he was trying to eat their food and battle them for it. That's a losing battle. He was longing to fill his own stomach with the pods - carob pods is what they were. It's a bitter black berry that sometimes the pigs ate off a bush. But was also taken – collected - and then molasses was extracted from the carob pods, and the pulp that was left from that was thrown to the pigs. So what he's doing very likely eating the pulp from carobs with the pigs.

When I was in high school a little bit in the summer, I worked for people who raised pigs in the east part of our city. It was a funny job, but one of my high-school friend's father was in the business, and they were the garbage collectors for the city of Los Angeles in those days. They collected all the garbage. They took it out east of the city, and they boiled it in massive boilers, and out came the boiled garbage, and it went on to concrete floors where there were pigs. And all the boiled garbage was eaten by the pigs, and then they sold the pigs, pigs were killed, bacon was made. The bacon was put in the grocery store, and the people who sent the garbage bought the bacon, and started the cycle all over again. That's how it works.

But in the early years in Los Angeles, the same people who collected the trash were the ones who provided all the pork, because that's how the system worked. And I can tell you, fighting pigs for something to eat would be a losing battle. They're nasty. And here is this Jewish guy out there and the incredulous reality is he's a pig. He's not with them. He's one of them, only wishing that he was better at getting food, longing, epithume, "strong desire." He's in the struggle with the pigs. It's just unthinkable. He's so low he can't get lower.

And whatever promise about job and money, verse 16 says at the end, "No one was giving anything to him." He didn't get anything. That's what makes me think that he stuck himself to this guy and the guy said, "Get out of here, go feed my pigs," and he had no other choice. He ran out there. He wasn't being paid anything, and he wound up acting like a pig, trying to eat pig slop, and get enough to fill his stomach.

You cannot even begin to understand the highbrow, elitist sensitivities of the Pharisees and the scribes imagining any Jewish young man doing this. Unthinkable. And in the end, nobody gave him anything. This is the greatest tragedy that they could ever conceive of. This is the greatest rebellion,

the greatest breach, the greatest waste of a life, waste of an opportunity. This is the most despicable kind of conduct that they could conceive. And that was the point. And now he's starving to death. This is desperation. This is the sinner: Poor, hungry, hopeless, trying to get a little pig slop. Nobody to help. Nobody to pity him.

What is the lesson here? The lesson is that sin is rebellion against God the Father. It is not rebellion so much against His law, it is more rebellion against His relationship. It is the violation of His fatherhood, His love. Sin is disdained, sure, for God's law, but before that it's disdain for God's person, God's authority, God's will. Sin is shunning all responsibility, all accountability. It is to deny God His place. It is to hate God. It is to wish God was dead. It is to not love Him at all, dishonor Him. It is to take all the gifts that He's surrounded you with in life and squander them as if they were nothing.

It is to run as far from God as you can get, to give Him no thought, no regard, no concern. It is to waste your life in self-indulgence, and dissipation, and unrestrained lust. It is to shun all except what you want, and it is reckless evil and selfish indulgence that ends you up in the pig slop, bankrupt spiritually, empty, destitute, nobody to help, nowhere to turn, facing death, eternal death.

And then the foolish sinner has exhausted plan A. I'll fix my own life. I'll go to psychology. I'll take drugs. I'll drink alcohol. I'll go to some self-help group. I'll move to a new neighborhood. I'll marry a new person. When all that stuff is exhausted, the sinner wakes up at the bottom. And this is where the young man is. A shameless request, a shameless rebellion, but it leads to a shameful repentance. And that's for next time. And is it ever amazing. Let's pray.

The story is not remote, our Father, it's very close to home. It's the story of every irreligious sinner, the story of every younger son who ran as far from God as he could get, she could get. It's the story of the outwardly dissolute, debauched, debased, immoral, self-indulgent, lustful of all sinners who come to the point where it's over, it's ended, lost everything. Nothing has meaning, nothing satisfies. They're just fighting to survive.

This is how it was with those tax collectors and sinners, and it's why they came. They wanted to hear from the One who had the bread of life. They wanted to hear from the One who offered forgiveness. They wanted to hear from the One who said, "God will restore you. God wants to reconcile you. God wants you back in His house."

Like the sheep that was brought back, like the coin that was recovered, God is in the business of recovering destitute, depleted, lonely, desperate sinners. This is where He finds His joy. This is where heaven rejoices. Father, we thank You for the great message that's in this part of the story, facing the reality of sin, desperation. Because this is where the sinner has to come.

As long as there's a plan A and it works at all, sinners don't come. It's when Plan A, B, C, every other plan fails, and there's nowhere else to go that the sinner remembers a loving Father whose character can be trusted, and the sinner is willing to repent. We're ready for that part of the story. We've lived it. We pray, Lord, that You will confirm to our hearts this understanding of what sin does, how horrible it is.

And we understand the Pharisees. They're agreeing. They're saying it's absolutely horrible, it's terrible. But as it turns out, they were worse, they were worse. The younger son, he's forgiven. The older one didn't want it, didn't think he needed it.

Father, we pray that You will help us to rejoice in the grace that is provided no matter how horrible our lives are. Jesus paints a picture here that can't be worse to show us that no matter how low the sinner goes, he can come to God, a loving Father with a repentant heart, and a God who can be trusted will provide forgiveness. We rejoice in that.

Father, dismiss us now with the blessing. Bring us back with great expectancy next Sunday to hear the story unfold in its next chapter. And gather us tonight at 6:00 as we go into the glories of Romans 7 and the wonders of spiritual transformation. Give us a great day, we pray in Your Son's name. Amen.

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