

The Gospel for Rebels

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a very warm welcome to you all today to our lunchtime service. I do hope you'll be able to join us for coffee and tea and perhaps a sandwich after the service if you do have time.

But let's begin with a prayer before we carry on. Dear Father, we thank you for these few moments out of our busy weeks which we can snatch to hear something of you.

And we ask that in the next few moments you would remind us of your great love for us. And that you would overwhelm us with the realization of how deep that love is.

And that you would send us back to our workplaces and to our homes with real joy in our hearts at a thought of that love.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Now we've got the next two weeks together. We're going to be looking at probably the most famous story Jesus ever told.

[1 : 1 1] The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. It's a wonderful story. It's a story that tells us so much about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Two weeks really isn't enough to mine everything in it. So let's turn to page 874 in the Bibles in front of you. And we will read the parable of the prodigal son.

874. 874. That's 874.

Luke 15. I'm going to read verses 1 and 2 and then I'll move on to verse 11. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them. And verse 11. This is Jesus now.

[2 : 2 1] And he said, there was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.

And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, severe famine arose in that country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. And no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread?

And I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

[3 : 2 6] Treat me as one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate.

For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now there are in some ways two different kinds of people in the world.

There are rebels who like to do things differently, who rebel against their parents, wear different clothes, happy to break the rules, maybe dye their hair an interesting color.

You know, people like me. And rule keepers who like to keep the rules of morality, who like to do things the way they're supposed to be done. And who often look down on those rebels.

[4 : 43] Both groups very often think that Jesus is not for them. Rebels think religion is for rule keepers, not for people like me. It's for people who don't really like fun.

They don't have any of that in church particularly. And even if I wanted, even if I was interested in Jesus, Jesus wouldn't accept someone like me.

On the other hand, there are the rule keepers who think, I don't need this forgiveness that Jesus offers. I mean, I might go to church perhaps, but this gospel of forgiveness and all, it's great for bad people.

It's great for alcoholics, particularly this stuff about being born again. It's great for people in real trouble, but I don't actually need that. Because I'm a pretty decent person already.

This parable, in its two halves, the younger son and the older son, deals directly with both groups of people. Now, the reason we read verses 1 and 2 is that it sets this parable in the context, the setting out Jesus told it in.

[5 : 51] From the start of Jesus' ministry, you'll know, he was often rejected by the religious leaders. But sinners, on the other hand, people who had done things to be really ashamed of, they loved him. And that made, of course, the religious leaders an awful lot angrier.

And that is where our passage begins. Sinners, the rebels, the prostitutes, the drunkards were coming to hear Jesus. The tax collectors, people who had betrayed their own nation for profit. And the religious leaders were shocked because Jesus didn't just let them come in, let them listen. He welcomed them eagerly. He was delighted to have them. And they thought, you know, a real religious leader would look down on these people, would frown at them a little bit more.

But that's not at all the way Jesus behaved. So Jesus tells this wonderful set of three stories. I wish we had time to go through all three of them. The lost sheep, the lost coin, and then our story.

And each of them explain what exactly he is doing. And they tell us about God and the way that he loves sinners. Now, our Bibles label the story we've just read, the parable of the prodigal son.

[7 : 06] And I tend to call it that. It's convenient. But we've got to remember these labels are added by the translators just to help us find our way around the Bibles. They're not really part of our Bibles. And this one is thoroughly wrong.

The reason I can tell it's wrong is because verse 11 starts, there was a man who had two sons. We can see this is the story of two sons and not one son because it says there was a man who had two sons.

Jesus is not being subtle here. There were two sons. We need to keep that in mind as we go through the story. We'll see more of it next week. But as we look at the younger brother this week, we see three sections.

Rejection in 12 to 16. Repentance in 17 to 19. And acceptance in 20 to 24. The story begins with that younger son saying to his father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me. In other words, give me my inheritance. I am really looking forward to having your money when you die. And I've been waiting for you to die.

[8 : 18] But it's taking quite a long time. I'm actually getting a bit bored waiting. You still aren't dead. Would it be okay if I just took it now and we could be done with all of that?

But this is a son whose relationship to his father is deeply broken. I mean, I don't know how your father would react if you said that to him.

I think in that time and place, the usual response was a very big stick and a good beating. But that's not this father. He divides the property between his two sons.

And the younger takes all he has and he travels far away. And he wastes his money on the best things that money can buy. Good food, expensive wine, a nice house, and a really fast donkey. Notice it doesn't say he did anything immoral with it. He's not spending it all on drugs or prostitutes. But he does waste it, every penny. And when he's wasted it all, there was a famine in that country.

[9 : 25] Food becomes more and more expensive. And he gets in real trouble. He couldn't feed himself. And this is a time without social services, without unemployment benefit. And he's a foreigner.

He's lucky to get a look of sympathy, let alone actual help. So he goes to get a job from someone in that place. And they send him out into the fields to feed pigs. And of course, then as now, Jews have a fairly strong attitude towards pigs.

It's not just that they're not allowed. It's that they're repulsive, dirty animals. This is the worst job that this lad could have. And that still isn't enough.

He's debased himself in a way to get that. But he's still starving. He looks at the pods the pigs are eating. And he can't eat them. They're inedible.

But he longs for something to put in his stomach. And no one is giving him anything. His wages won't do. He can't get what he needs. All his big dreams of all that he would do with all his money have come to this.

[10:24] To absolute disaster. And of course, some of us know what that feels like. There are some of us, I'm sure, who have dreams of career success or of romance.

That have left us with nothing but ashes and regrets. Or we've simply tried to live for ourself. For our own ambitions, our own purposes. And choosing our own values, our own aims in life.

And ended up with nothing but emptiness, depression and loneliness. But most of all, of course, this is a picture of every human being who runs away from God.

Who, like this son, is willing to take God's good gifts. Happy to take what he's made. But then rejects relationship with him. Without realizing we're like children who wish their father was dead. So they could have the inheritance. And bit by bit, we become slowly more in need deep on the inside. More and more empty. Because we need him.

[11:31] We can fill that need with all sorts of things that we don't feel it. But it's still there, deep inside. We need relationship with him. And so that brings us on to 17 to 19.

The younger son's repentance. But when he came to himself, he has been a fool. This isn't just him coming to his senses.

This is him coming back to himself. He can see that everything he's done has been madness. He remembers everyone who works for his father has plenty food.

And here he is starving to death. So he thinks, I've got to go home. I've got to go back to my father. And I'll say, sorry. You know, father, I've sinned against heaven. I've sinned before you.

He's going to admit that he's done real wrong. And he'll say, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Which, of course, is true.

[12:32] He's chosen to cut himself off from his own family. Disinherited himself, in a way. And he'll say, treat me as one of your hard servants. In other words, I don't deserve to be your son.

But I can work for you. Give me a job. You know, I can't be what I should be to you. But let me try and stand on my own two feet.

Let me work my way. Earn my keep. This is the younger son repenting of his sin. It's not a very good repentance, if we're honest.

He does it because he's hungry. Not because he's deeply regretful in his heart. And even when he is sorry, even when he is repenting, he still thinks he's got something to offer his father.

Our repentance, when we first become Christians, is often very like that. Quite self-centered. Often try to include some conditions. You know, if you forgive me, God, I'll do better from now on. We often keep on thinking we've got something to offer.

[13:32] So it's really important that we see what the father does next. And in 20 to 24, we see the acceptance of the father. Before we plunge into those verses, I think because we live in such a different culture, we need to just step back a moment.

Put ourselves in the son's shoes for a moment. He's walked all the way home. That fast camel's been sold long ago. It's not a donkey. He's hungry.

He's probably in torn clothing. He's got to come back to the village where his father lives. He's got to go back through that village to the family home and ask where his father is.

And every person he sees knows exactly how he left home. And all the big dreams he'd had. And the big pouch of money he was carrying. And now they see him coming back hungry and desperate.

And they know all that he's done to his father. What are they going to think of him? What are they going to say to him? And then he's got to come to his father.

[14:35] And he's got to start the conversation in which he's got to say sorry. Just walking into his home is going to be full of the deepest shame for him.

He's thinking all the way home. How can I do this? How can I face the people I grew up with? You know, this isn't a modern city where you can walk through anonymously, get off the bus and go and press the doorbell and say hello dad.

It's not even a modern village where at least once you get home, you can go into the house and the door and the windows protect you and give you privacy. They don't have glass in their windows.

Everyone in this village knows exactly what's going to go on.

I don't know if you've ever made a catastrophic mistake at work, a really huge error and had to go to your boss and tell him what you've done. Well, he's faced with doing that in the midst of a large open plan office with everyone listening.

This son comes back to the village expecting that walk of shame back to his father. And that is exactly what doesn't happen in this story. While he was still a long way off, verse 20, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

[15:55] His father sees him when he is still far off and he feels deep love and compassion and he runs and throws his arms around him. Now, here in the UK, if someone runs, and particularly an older man, we think, great, he's keeping fit.

That's good. It's a little difficult just to explain just how odd it was in that time and place. It was a lot easier when I was preaching this recently to the Farsi service or indeed explaining it to an Iranian friend the other day.

I asked, you know, do people in your culture, older men, ever run? And I got a little bit of a giggle. And then I talked about how he'd be wearing long robes, as people did in those days, particularly older men, and have to lean down and pull him up around his waist to run.

And, you know, if you're a woman, you ever tried running in really long skirts, it's that sort of idea. And the only people in Iranian culture, which is where my friend comes from, who wear long robes like that usually are mullahs.

And the very idea of a mullah running along the street with his robes pulled up, showing his knees, was enough to get quite prolonged giggles. This is deeply embarrassing.

[17:11] This is a man choosing to lose all his dignity to go and meet his son. His son faced huge shame in coming home. And this father thinks instead, I will run to him.

I will take the shame so my son doesn't have to. And when he gets to him, he throws his arms around his neck and he keeps on kissing him. It's like someone who's been apart for years and years.

He just enfolds him in a huge embrace with kissing and tears. This is the son who treated his father as if he was dead. But when he comes back, he gets the welcome of a father who has been longing for him all those years apart.

And the son begins to say the words he planned. He says, I've sinned. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But he can't say the next words. You see that? He can't say the bit he planned to say. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

He's seen how the father's welcomed him. It would be an insult, wouldn't it, to that kind of love to say, treat me as a servant, because he's already treating him as a son. He can't be a worker. He can't earn his father's love.

[18:19] The father has given him his love freely already. And the father celebrates. Bring the best robe, probably his own. Get the servants to put it on him.

Dress him as if they were his master. He was their master. Put a ring on his hands, sandals on his feet, symbols of authority. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. You know, he's not just, let's do a nice roast, maybe a chicken, and the family can celebrate together.

Kill a calf. That's enough to feed a village. He wants to share his joy with everyone around. Why? My son was dead. And he is alive again.

He was lost and he is found. He'd gone away. He'd lost to the father. He'd treated the father as if he was dead. He'd cut him off. But now he's home. And that is why Jesus welcomed sinners.

People who'd gone far away from God and rejected him. People who are dead to God. Lost to him. That's what we are when we leave God. That's you and me till we come to Jesus.

[19:23] But when we come home, God runs to us and puts his arms around us. That's what Jesus is offering the sinners who came to him in those days.

To be part of God's people, his family again. Not worthy to be called his son. No. But he was quite willing to bring them back into the family all the same. We might, like that younger son, feel that all we can do is come back to God and earn his favor.

Try and do a bit better. But he loves us with a love that won't let us try and earn our way back. He runs to meet us and welcomes us home. And when we come back, we're coming back to a God who is celebrating our return in heaven.

And one day we will get to join him there in the great feast at the end of time where he celebrates our return home. Now to finish, this half of the story, the younger son, is about the rebels among us. As I mentioned at the start, the two groups, the rebels and the rule keepers. This is about the rebels. Some of us are like that younger brother. Some of us sin in the same way he did, going far away from God.

[20 : 39] We don't try to behave well. We indulge ourselves. We're rebels, really. And there's a temptation to think that what God wants from us is simply to turn into another rule keeper, another conformist.

To stand on your own feet and pay your dues. And of course it's true that when we come back, he does need us to change. He does want us to change.

And we will change. But he doesn't just want us to live up to the standards of the conformists. He wants a relationship of love with us. He wants to welcome us home.

Have we come to know this God? This God who will go through that walk of shame for us. Perhaps there's shame in your life.

Perhaps there are things that you look back on and you think, it sends a shiver down your spine at the thought of what you did. And there are people you can't face because of your past. Well, he is willing to bear that shame and sin.

[21 : 39] When Jesus came and died on the cross, he died naked and alone in the shame of a criminal's death so that he could welcome you home. That was him running to you, extending his arms open wide to bring you home in love to the Father.

This is the only place we can find the love and acceptance we were made for. And Jesus offers that to every single one of us.

That love that is more than we can imagine or grasp. A love we do not deserve, but which he pours out completely. So let us all come home to him.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, this is a love beyond what we can imagine.

Kindness and forgiveness that we don't dare hope for truly, but you give it freely, wholeheartedly, and you call us home.

[22 : 53] Help us, Lord, to see the depth of that love. And now, may the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you with spirit, his spirit in your inner being.

so that you may know his love, how broad and long and high and deep it is beyond all knowledge. And that you may be filled with the fullness of God and the blessing of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit remain with you always.

Amen.