

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: Snapshots of a Savior¹

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

(Luke 7, 15)

Study #4

Introduction: Caution! Danger ahead!

Wise King Solomon warns us to be careful about who we hang with.

*[13:20] He who walks with wise men will be wise
But the companion of fools will suffer harm.*

We could add more proverbs that say the same thing. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul adds to that store of wisdom with these words: *[1 Corinthians 15:33] Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."*

Wise parents take those words to heart. We encourage our kids to choose wisely when it comes to friendships. Parents have the advantage of having been around the block. We know that lives can be shipwrecked when exposed, especially too early, to bad influences.

Of course, we don't want to go overboard or be overprotective, but we're not being loving if we don't protect.

Isn't it ironic then, that we find Jesus so frequently hanging with bad influences? He seems to violate, personally, the parenting wisdom we seek to practice.

Jesus, and sinners...

¹ Please see the end for some reflections, courtesy of Henri Nouwen, author of The Return of the Prodigal Son.

Jesus actually had a reputation - and He knew it. He knew that behind His back people referred to Him as a "*gluttonous man and a drunkard*",² not because anyone had ever seen Him drunk or eating too much, but directly because of the company He kept.

Once, Jesus was visiting in the home of a Pharisee when a woman entered. Luke tells us that the purpose of her visit was to honor Jesus.

We read that the woman *[7:37]...brought an alabaster vial of perfume, [38] and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.*

It's wonderful to see this woman's devotion to Jesus, and we're caught up in the scene, until we keep reading and hear this:

[39] Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."

We didn't know that this woman was an immoral woman, but the Pharisee did. He believed that holiness is polluted by unholiness. Therefore, holy people like Jesus should stay away from notorious sinners like this woman.

The wisdom of the Pharisee is mirrored by many today who are cautious of corrupting influences.

Jesus was completely un-cautious. Now, of course, He was the Son of God, but He gladly allowed the woman's presence at the table and welcomed her act of devotion.

On another occasion, without giving a thought to contamination, He dealt personally with a man possessed of a whole host of demons. Nobody else would have done that.

² Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34.

Late in His life He spent the day with Zaccheus, a short man who was short on integrity. He was a tax-collector and a cheat. Jesus' decision to spend time with Zaccheus prompted observers to grumble, *[Luke 19:7] "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."* But at the end of that day with Jesus the transformed Zaccheus had decided to repay those he had defrauded 4x.

Jesus' justification for spending time with Zaccheus takes us straight to the heart of the Man - *[10] "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."*

He even invited a chief tax-collector - Matthew/Levi - into the group of twelve apostles.

Jesus was, if nothing else, a friend of sinners.

This reality is placed in bold relief in one scene recorded in Luke's Gospel. Through the setting of the scene and the words of Jesus we can't miss His friendliness toward sinners.

Certain types of people were drawn to Jesus. He was a friend-magnet to people who misbehaved.

SETTING THE SCENE (LUKE 15:1-2)

Those Who Wanted to Listen to Jesus (v. 1)

[1] Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.

The average, everyday Jew hated tax collectors, and we can understand why. By collecting taxes they helped the Romans AND enriched themselves at the expense of their fellow Jews.

They were considered traitors who, for the sake of financial gain, collected taxes for the oppressors.

The term "sinners" on the other hand, referred to notorious transgressors of God's Law. The "sinners" were the immoral people.

They were the drunks, the prostitutes, the profane. No one needed to tell them that they had transgressed God's Law. They knew it.

For the most part, they had stopped the pretense of trying to appear to conform to the Jewish community's standards. But, they are the first people referred to in this passage. And what were they doing? They have gathered to Jesus to listen to Jesus.

Here is a group of people who were the outcasts of the religious community, seeking out Jesus, who was the center of attention for the whole religious community.

Clearly, they were **hungry** for what only Jesus could provide.

Far from being un-interested in spiritual things, they were intensely sensitized to the gaping hole in their hearts. They were desperate to find something to fill the vacuum in their souls.

But there is a second group mentioned here. They also are listening to Jesus and have gathered to Him. They are the Pharisees and the scribes, the spiritual leaders of first century Israel.

They're listening, but not like the tax collectors and sinners are listening. They're on a grumbling expedition.

Those Who Wanted to Grumble at Jesus (v. 2)

[2] Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

These guys took offense at Jesus being with sinners. He was presenting Himself as a religious man and religious men shouldn't hang with "them."³

And, to actually eat with sinners - as Jesus was evidently doing here - was even worse than mere association.

³ The Pharisees of that time period are on record as saying that they would purposefully NOT teach "sinners" the Law of Moses.

Jesus, however, enjoyed getting together with these people. They invited Him to their parties and welcomed Him into their homes. They felt comfortable with Him, and He was at ease with them. He was their Friend.

On this particular occasion this very “mixed” crew has come together because of Jesus - and it’s an opportunity too good to pass up.

Jesus has a captive audience and He spoke. He spoke here as He so frequently did. He told stories.

God, the Searching Shepherd (vv. 4-7)

The Shepherd’s Crisis (v. 4)

[4] “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?”⁴

We are to envision one sheep wandering off and separating itself from the flock. Maybe it’s because of stupidity or stubbornness. The shepherd doesn’t lie back on his couch, continue watching TV, thinking, “*Stupid sheep. Let it figure it out. She’ll come home, wagging her tail behind her.*”

NO!

He goes searching for the one lost sheep. All of his attention is riveted on finding the one lost sheep.

The Shepherd’s Care (v. 5)

[5] “When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”

The shepherd doesn’t beat the found sheep. He treats it tenderly and lovingly.

And then, when he gets home, he lets everybody in on his great news.

⁴ See Is. 40, Ez. 34 for the imagery of the sheep and the shepherd in speaking of God and Israel.

The Shepherd’s Joy! (v. 6)

[6] “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 audience appreciated the nice story. But it’s more than a story. It’s a window into the heart of God. Jesus had seen this exact response in heaven countless times, up close and personal, as sinners were reconciled to God.

[7] I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

I have a feeling that the sinners and tax collectors REALLY liked this story. Not so sure about the Pharisees...

Well, right on the heels of this sheep story Jesus tells a second story. Here He shifts to a domestic scene.

God, the Searching Homemaker (vv. 8-10)

The Domestic Crisis (v. 8)

[8] “Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?”

Each of the coins the woman has is valuable, about equal to what a working man would earn for a day’s labor.

And, like the shepherd in the previous story, when she discovered that the coin was missing, this woman flew into action.

(By the way, Kathy is a far better “finder of lost things” than I am. I’ll look for something in vain that she’ll find quickly. I think it’s due of focus. Whether it’s a piece of paper I’ve misplaced, a set of keys or a wallet or the car, she, like the woman in Jesus’ story, searches until she finds it.)

This search could not wait until morning. She had to find the coin NOW. So, she lit a lamp to search in the dark of night in every nook and cranny until she found it.

And, when she finally found it, like the shepherd, she rejoiced.

The Woman's Joy! (v. 9)

[9] “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’”

And again, Jesus wants us to see heaven in this good housekeeping story.

[10] “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

There is a building crescendo to these stories. The shepherd with one hundred sheep wouldn't feel the loss of a single sheep as deeply as the woman who lost one out of ten coins.

Well, Jesus has one more story to tell and in this story He ups the ante. Here is a much greater crisis. Here, we have a father who loses a son.

God, the Searching Father (vv. 11-32)

A Prodigal Son (vv. 11-24)

The Father opens the cage (vv. 11-13)

The request of the younger son (vv. 11-12a)

[11] “And He 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.”’⁵

⁵ There were a couple of ways in which a family inheritance could be divided between older and younger sons in a Jewish family. Generally, in Jesus' day, in a two son family, the first born son would receive 2/3rds of his father's estate, and the second born would receive 1/3rd. In families with three sons, the first born

Jesus speaks matter-of-factly. So calmly that we might miss that what is happening here is unconscionable. Jesus' audience wouldn't have missed it, though. A Jewish son asking for his inheritance was tantamount to that son wishing his father dead.

He makes a disrespectful, offensive demand. He wanted his inheritance NOW.

“I'm not about to wait around for you to die, old man. Give me what's coming to me now.”

We aren't told what the father's emotional response was to the son's demand. We don't know if he was more heartbroken over his son's lovelessness, or incensed at his son's callousness.

Regardless of his emotional response, though, this father gave what the son requested.

Sure, his wise heart knew what a horrible future lay ahead of his son, and that the money he was giving would destroy him. But he granted his son the dignity of autonomy, and allowed him to leave. He opened the cage and set his son free.

Home-leaving (rebellion)

[12b] “So he divided his wealth between them. [13a] And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country...”

If the son's request for his inheritance was uglier than at first appears, so was the leaving more than an expression of a desire to “get out and see the world.”

He wanted to break with everything that had been a part of his life to this point. He “repented” of his upbringing, his home, his family, his community. He rebelled against it all.

would receive 2/4's while the other two received 1/4 each. But, it was not unusual for the younger sons to receive gifts of varying size from their father, while the oldest son would actually inherit the bulk of all the father's holdings, land, livestock, etc.... In fact, this is what is implied in the term, “birthright”.

His leaving was a rejection of his father.

We could have predicted what the son would do once he arrived in that distant country. And we would have been right.

Profligate living

[13b] “and there he squandered his estate with loose living.”⁶

With the kind of profligate living implied in these words it doesn't take long for outgo to outstrip income. Very quickly the young man is flat, busted broke.

Then, as any respectable country western singer might put it, things took a turn for the worse.

A harvest of bitter consequences (vv. 14-16)

Need strikes. (v. 14)

[14] Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.”

Part of the reason the younger son was in need was totally his own fault. He spent all of his inheritance living as he pleased.

But part of the reason he was in need had nothing to do with his decisions - there was a severe famine in the land.

So, in light of the famine, work would have been hard to find, pay would have been low, and prices would have been high. This kid is in a mess.

And it got worse.

⁶ J. B. Phillips renders the end of verse 13, “**He squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance.**” The sense of the original word is that of a lifestyle that is reckless and unthinking.

He became humiliated. (15-16)

[15] “So he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. [16] And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.”

Now, it might not seem like much of a big deal to you to be hired out to someone else in a foreign country. Trust me. It would have been considered an extremely degrading thing for a first century Jew to be hired out to a Gentile.

The humiliation became worse for this younger son because his job was to feed his employer's pigs - unclean, detestable animals under the Mosaic Law.

And, he was starving. He was so hungry that the hog swill looked good to him.

You and I have known from the beginning that this son was lost. Now HE knows it. He's starving, penniless, abandoned, feeding swine far from home.

So what's next? Homesickness.

In the midst of his crisis, a light bulb came on. He “**came to his senses**” and remembered HOME.

The prodigal comes to his senses (vv. 17-19)

[17] “But 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. [18] ‘I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; [19] ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.””⁷

⁷ He expresses sorrow, not for what he has suffered/lost, but for what he has done. - a true sign of genuine repentance.

It's a good plan and a good speech, as far as it goes. He's traveling in the right direction - to his father. But this son has no idea what kind of a man his father really is.

This son believes that his father is a harsh man, not a loving man. He moves toward his father's house, hoping to bunk down with the other hired hands, never dreaming that he would find grace and forgiveness.

But, at least he is returning.

Home at last! (vv. 20-24)

The return (v. 20)

[20] “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

As Jesus tells the story He doesn't say that the son trudges up the road to go home, or to his village, or to his neighborhood. No, **“he came to his father.”**

And the father rushes out to greet the son. As eagerly as any shepherd searches for a lost sheep or any homemaker searches for a lost coin, this father rushed out to welcome his son.⁸

The welcome by the father in this parable signals the end of the young son's rebellion. The father saw him coming from a long way off (and certainly Jesus meant to say that the father was looking for him.).

He ran to him. And no perfunctory handshake will work here. This is a time for embracing and kissing.

Well, after the father's compassion attack, the prodigal backed away, brushed himself off, and began the speech he had prepared when he was in the foreign pigpen, starving to death.

[21] ““Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, I am no longer worthy to be called your son....” - and the father rudely interrupted him. Just cut him off before he even had a chance to finish his really fine speech.

“Sorry, son. There's no time for your speech. There's a party to plan!”

The reception (22-24)

[22] “But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; [23] and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate [24] for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’”

In this party-throwing spirit, the father pictures for us the heart of God. Your heavenly Father's posture to you this morning - and at all times when you come to Him with a repentant heart - is open arms.

What a beautiful parable. In fact, in each of the three parables we have seen this morning, the seeking, welcoming heart of God has been obvious in the shepherd, the homemaker, and the father.

He is a God who seeks the lost. Jesus is truly a friend to sinners like the son who ran away - and what a great place to end the story.

But the story's not finished. Not by a long shot, because there is another son, an older brother.

The elder brother hasn't exactly been lurking in the shadows, but he has been off in the wings. Now he takes center stage.

⁸ Investigation into the customs of the times show that had the father not searched for the son he might have come to great harm in the village since he had dishonored his father by leaving in the manner in which he had left. The father's searching was as important to this story as it was in the stories of the sheep and the coin.

Another Prodigal Son (vv. 25-32)

Big Brother makes a disturbing discovery (vv. 25-27)

[25] “Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.”

This elder brother called one of his father’s servants, asking what in the world was going on. The servant explained.

[27] “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.”

And what kind of a response would you expect from a big brother at such news? “He’s back? My little brother? Fantastic - let me go see him!” Not quite...

The angels in heaven might rejoice over the return of the lost. Not this big brother.

Resentment seethes and grows. (v. 28)

[28a] “But he became angry, and was not willing to go in.”

After some period of time, the older brother’s sulking absence became awkward. So, the father came out from the party, searched for and found his other son (the father is always searching for his sons) and begged him to come in and join the festivities.

The older brother would have none of it.

Big Brother seethes with rage - and vents. (vv. 29-30)

[29] “But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;

[30] but when this son of yours⁹ came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’”

He pleads faithfulness and loyalty and obedience to his father for all these years. “I have been the model son....” “I’ve been slaving for you all my life.”¹⁰

And who can challenge this elder son’s claims? It is true. He had been the model son.

But, this son had never grasped the idea that the primary thing about sonship had more to do with relationship than blessing; less to do with works and more to do with grace.

Mark it down: Those afflicted with “older brother syndrome” never feel that they are being treated as well as they should be. And we now see that the older son is just as lost as the younger son had been.

He was every bit the prodigal his brother was. And he was in even more of a precarious position because, while the younger brother knew full well that he was lost, the older brother hadn’t yet seen that he had strayed.

There is something very clean-cut and identifiable about the younger son’s sin - the immorality is overt. You can see it.

The lostness and prodigality of the older son is much harder to deal with because he did all the right things.

He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, and hardworking. People no doubt respected him, admired him, praised him. He was probably considered by all the model son he knew himself to be.

But he’s wrong. He’s as lost as lost can be.

⁹ It is surely significant that he refers to the prodigal as “this son of yours” and not “my brother.”

¹⁰ It is impossible to miss his likeness to the Pharisees’ and scribes’ attitude toward the “tax-gatherers and sinners.” The elder brother was not willing to join the party held in honor of a notorious sinner’s salvation, even if that sinner was his little brother.

So the searching father has words for his second lost son.

A glimpse of the father's heart (vv. 31-32)

[31] "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours¹¹ was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

And THAT is the way the parable ends - with us wondering whatever happened to the elder son.

Did he let himself be persuaded by his father to welcome his brother?
Did he finally enter the house and participate in the celebration?
Did he embrace his brother and welcome him home as his father had done?
Did he sit down with the father and his brother at the same table and enjoy a festive meal with them?

We do not know whether the elder son EVER reconciled himself with his brother, his father, or himself. Unlike a fairy tale, this story provides no happy ending.¹²

What we do know beyond a shadow of a doubt is the depth of the searching heart of God. And we know that Jesus is the friend of sinners.

Conclusion:

These stories (and especially the last one) would have packed quite a wallop for Jesus' audience of Pharisees and sinners.

Some of them had run away from home; others had strayed while living the straight and narrow. To both groups, the message was the same.

God is searching for you. He hasn't given up on You.

Right now, as we meet, there is a frantic search going on in the southern Indian Ocean, described as about the most remote spot on the planet.

A multi-national task force is searching for any sign of Malaysian Airlines flight 370. To this point nobody knows what happened to the plane and nobody knows where it is. We hope against hope - and the search continues.

From the very beginning, God has been searching for lost people. He has sent prophets and priests and kings to look through the wreckage and save us from our rebellion.

Two thousand years ago, the search became personal. God sent His Son to look for us and to bring us home.

As it was then, so it is today. We either flee to a distant country to escape the God of grace or we live respectably and miss His amazing grace that way.

Regardless, God is searching for you. Jesus is your Friend.

Lost older brother or lost younger brother. It doesn't matter. He invites you to trust Him and to find life in Him today.

Forgiveness is offered. A party is being thrown for all the broken-hearted, repentant sinners who are coming home. Come on in. Join the party.

Today, we worship Jesus, the Friend of sinners.

¹¹ While the older brother does not refer to the prodigal as his brother, yet his father calls the younger, "your brother."

¹² It is like the Old Testament book of Jonah, which ends with the prophet upset with God over the salvation of the Assyrians; or the Gospel of Mark, which concludes with the disciples scattered and the women afraid, despite Jesus' resurrection.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

(Thoughts from Henri Nouwen)

Many of my thoughts about the parable of the prodigal son(s) derive from a book by Henri Nouwen, which in turn was inspired by Rembrandt's painting, The Return of the Prodigal Son.

The Prodigal was one of Rembrandt's last paintings, an oil on canvas masterpiece eight feet high by six feet wide, now on display in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia.

For much of his life Nouwen was an academic Roman Catholic priest who taught at Notre Dame, Harvard and Yale. For the last ten years of his life, though, he changed vocations and became a pastor of L'Arche Daybreak in Toronto, a community for the mentally handicapped. This season of his life was transformative and by all accounts the most fulfilling.

Nouwen's experience with the painting (The Return of the Prodigal Son) was also profound. He sat and looked at it for hours upon hours, soaking in every detail.

He tried to view the painting as an insider looking out rather than just as an outsider looking in. He moved from bystander to participant, from judge to repentant sinner, from teacher about love, to being loved as the beloved. He says he had no idea how deeply rooted his resistance was, or how agonizing it would be to come to his senses, fall on his knees, and let his tears flow.

Becoming a student of the painting, he came to realize that he would never be able to live the great commandment to love without allowing himself to be loved without conditions or prerequisites. Henri Nouwen came to see that he was desperately searching for that inner place where he too could be held as safely as the young man in the painting.

Nouwen describes himself, when he was a young man, being the younger brother, an angry young man lost in causes and movements. Later, he saw himself as the dutiful older son - jealous, angry, touchy, sullen, self-righteous.

Among his more provocative thoughts is the casting of Jesus as the Prodigal who left His Father's house, went to a foreign country, gave away all that He had, and returned through His cross to His Father's home and received, again, the Father's love.

Here are some gems from the pen of Henri Nouwen:

"One of the greatest challenges to the spiritual life is to receive forgiveness."

"In the general sense, yes, I can believe that God forgives sin. But, MY sins are too awful for God's grace. MY sins stretch the limits of the cross's capacity to the breaking point. And so, we resist coming to God for forgiveness, thinking that the offer is for everyone else - not me."

"For years I had instructed students on the spiritual life, trying to help them see the importance of living it. But had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?"

"Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home I am glad to claim. I must look far and wide to find one. I am the prodigal every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."

"People who are not resting in God's love are very prone to moving up or down with the waves of emotion and are more easily tempted to leave home."

"People who are aware that they are loved by God don't feel the need to prove themselves, don't heed the siren calls to resentment and rivalry of others, the need for revenge, lust and greed for what isn't theirs. They don't dream of becoming rich, powerful and famous. They are content in the Father's embrace."