

Found and Lost **Luke 15:11-32**

Some years ago, I heard a talk about evangelism. It may even have been some decades ago – my memory's a bit vague about it. The person giving the talk wasn't an Australian – but I can't remember what nationality they were. He asked a question.

How do you do evangelism in Australia? Everyone's got it so good. How do you get them to realise they have a need – a need that only Jesus can fill?

Life's pretty good in Australia. Sure, we like to whinge about it – that's one of our national sports – shame it's not an Olympic event. But, overall, life's good.

- We've got a good standard of living.
- We've got plenty of food.
- We've got nice houses.
- We've got oodles of entertainment.

What more do we need? Yeah, I know you only have to go to the letterbox, fish out the junk mail, and you'll find all sorts of other things to get your mind salivating – but, by and large, you do have the ability to go out and buy them.

It's easy for us Australians simply to sail through life and just enjoy the ride. And if, heaven forbid, you feel bored, you can always take in a movie or go to a concert or have a holiday or turn on the TV or play a computer game or ... We've just got so much choice of how we can mindlessly while away the time. We don't need anything else. Why would anyone want to bother investigating Jesus? If you think you've already got it made, why would it even enter your head to think there may be something you're

missing out on?

Now, I know that's over-stating it a bit. People in Australia do still face difficulties.

- Some face hard work situations.
- Some face unemployment.
- Some face rebellious teenagers.
- Some face life-threatening diseases.
- Some face tragedies from fatal car accidents.

There are plenty of difficulties that intrude even into the average Australian lifestyle from time to time.

But the point remains valid. For where do most Australians turn when difficulties strike? More often than not, it's simply to something to distract them from the pain.

- The comfort of food and drink – especially alcohol.
- The distraction of a long movie.
- The excitement of some extreme sport.
- The risks of a gambling splurge.

They turn back to the lifestyle they're comfortable with – the comfortable lifestyle that gives them everything they want – and they refuse to admit that perhaps they have an underlying need that lifestyle can't meet.

The Lost Son

Why did Jesus tell this story? We saw it last week at the beginning of the chapter.

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear Him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law thought they had life all worked out. It wasn't quite the same as the

average Australian. It wasn't in terms of just enjoying a comfortable lifestyle with plenty of pleasant distractions. That wasn't their particular method. Yet, they were still confident that they understood how it all worked. They'd put everything together in their own way and they had a formula that worked for them. They could stand on their own two feet and not acknowledge any need.

Their formula had to do with being upright.

- They understood all about God from the teachings of the Old Testament – that God was holy and just and righteous and upheld moral order.
- They understood they were in a special covenant relationship with God – God was their God and they were His special people.
- They understood it was important for them to be moral and upright people – they had God's law that instructed them what to do and not do.
- They understood the need to maintain the proper rituals in the temple and keep up the required sacrifices.

And that's what they did – at least, in their own eyes. And so, they were quite confident they were in God's good books. They were in God's kingdom. They had it made. They had no need for anyone to rescue them.

And further than that, as we saw last week, they weren't into search and rescue missions themselves. These tax collectors and "sinners" – well, good people just didn't associate with people like that. There was too much risk of being contaminated by their sinfulness. Jesus should realise that – if He's really from God. And if He was really from God, He'd know He should be mixing with the right people – people like the Pharisees and teachers

of the law.

Now, that's not how Jesus saw the situation. Jesus wasn't interested in mixing with people who were already "safe". His mission was to rescue lost people. That's what God's interested in. And so Jesus told those three stories we looked at last week to make just that point.

- The story of the shepherd who lost one of his hundred sheep – how he went searching for that sheep.
- The story of the woman who lost one of her ten coins – how she turned her house upside-down looking for that coin.
- The story of the man who lost one of his two sons – how he longed for that son to return and rejoiced greatly when he did.

God's in the business of rescuing lost people. These tax collectors and "sinners" – they're definitely lost people. What's more, they've got a pretty good idea they're lost. Jesus' stories encourage them. There's hope for them. God wants them to come to their senses and return to Him. He doesn't want them to stay lost.

Yet, with the third story, Jesus doesn't stop at the point of the great party when the son comes home – the point where we stopped last week. He goes on to talk about the second son

- the son who didn't run away from the father;
- the son who stayed with the father all those years and worked faithfully for him
- the son who doesn't appear to be lost.

The reason he does this is because this son may be just as lost as the first one – even though he doesn't realise it. This is the climax of the three stories. This son corresponds to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This son

is the warning to them about their grumbling about Jesus mixing with "sinners" and tax collectors.

The Son's Response

In verse 25, the focus of Jesus' story shifts from the younger son to the older son. While his father's been busy welcoming back his long-lost brother, he's been busy in the fields. He's coming back in for the day when he hears a celebration going on. He's puzzled.

- There wasn't anything on the family calendar when he left for work that morning.
- No note stuck on the fridge about a party.
- No text message letting him know about this great celebration going on in his own house.

It's not surprising he wonders what's going on.

It doesn't take him too long to find out – and, when he does, he's not particularly happy. *Angry* is the word the NIV uses. He thinks the whole deal's unfair.

- This younger son's already had his share of the estate and he's blown it all. Why should the father waste any more of the estate throwing a party for him?
- This younger son's thumbed his nose at the father and gone off and done his own thing. Why should the father simply ignore that great slur on his own honour and just welcome the guy back?

It just doesn't seem just. Monopoly's got the right idea. Do the wrong thing – and you go to gaol: do not pass go and do not collect \$200. That's the sort of thing the father should have done. But instead it looks like: Do the wrong thing – get given a great party. Why don't we all just go out and do the wrong thing?

More than that, this older son starts to make comparisons. He gets a little bit self-centred at this point. Effectively he says: Let's look at this whole thing from my point of view for a minute. What sort of message is this party sending to me?

- I've been slaving away for you all these years – I haven't wasted your resources on wild living.
- I've obeyed you all these years – remember, I wasn't the one who told you I couldn't wait till you died before I got my hands on your money.
- I'm the faithful son. I'm the one you've been showing off down at the synagogue all these years.

What do I get out of it? You've never even thrown me a little party – let alone this big shindig you're giving this other son of yours. It's just not fair.

And he's right. It's not fair. That's the definition of grace. That's the definition of mercy. It's being treated in a way you don't deserve. If you get something you deserve – well, that's the idea of merit and being paid for services rendered – that's not grace or mercy.

If I go to work and do a good, solid week's work and I get paid my wages at the end of the week – there's no grace or mercy in that. That's simply the agreement I made. I do my work; you pay me for it. But suppose I don't feel like going to work one week. It's not because I'm sick. It's not because I'm on holidays or I've taken compassionate leave. It's simply that I'm lazy and don't feel motivated to work this week – and so I don't go. What do I deserve?

- I don't deserve to be paid because I haven't done any work – I haven't kept my end of the bargain.
- I deserve the sack – I've shown I'm not interested in

the job or my employer.

So, how'd it be if, even knowing all that, my employer:

- not only didn't sack me;
- not only paid my full wages for the week;
- but also gave me four-weeks' extra pay as a bonus.

And if you were working the same job – and you turned up all week and worked hard all week and the employer only gave you your normal wages – how'd you feel about that?

That's the sort of thing that's going on here with this elder brother. That's the sort of thing that's going on with these Pharisees and teachers of the law. They saw themselves as being faithful to God. They'd worked hard at obeying Him. They'd been doing their duty all these years.

- Yet Jesus goes around mixing with tax collectors and "sinners".
- Jesus tells stories about the heavenly banquet where it's the riff-raff that sit at the table.

It just doesn't seem fair.

The Father's Heart

What's the father's response to this outburst?

- He addresses him tenderly as "my son". When the older son launches into his angry tirade, there's not even a polite acknowledgement of their relationship – he just goes straight into his anger. Not so with the father. He uses a term of endearment. He reminds him of his love and concern for him.
- Secondly, he agrees with the son's assessment of the overall situation. This son has stayed with him. This son has worked faithfully. This son will get all the property.
- Thirdly, I think it's also worth noting that he goes

out to the older son. Just as he longed for his younger son – and saw him from a long way off and ran out to embrace him, so with the older son he takes the initiative to go out to him to help him deal with his anger and to encourage him to share the father's joy and join the celebration.

In other words, the father hasn't changed. He's consistent in his character. He's loving and merciful and gracious and compassionate. Just as he showed those qualities to the wayward son who repented and returned, so he shows the same qualities to the faithful son who wants to remain on the outside. There's no harsh rebuke here. He doesn't return the elder son's anger. It's a gentle invitation. Perhaps the big difference is that he doesn't embrace this son – not because he doesn't want to, but because the son himself is not at a point of wanting it. He's hostile to the father's overtures.

It's worth pausing at this point to note some of the ironies – the contrasts – being thrown up with these two sons.¹

- First, the son who was lost and outside the family is now on the inside. He's welcomed back and in the house and celebrating. Yet, the son who's been on the inside all along is now outside the house complaining. He's not celebrating with the father; he's arguing with him.
- Secondly, though he's been faithful and obedient and worked hard for his father in the past, at this very point he opposes the father. The father's will is to celebrate the return of his lost son. This elder son objects and, in as much of the story as we're told, refuses to come in and share the father's joy.

¹ Refer Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Michigan: Baker, 1996) 1317-1318.

At this point, he's being disobedient to the father.

- Thirdly, the younger son gets to the point where he comes to his senses and he recognises he's not worthy to be acknowledged as a son, but he's willing to be a servant in his father's house. The older son complains because he's been serventing away for his father all these years. He resents what the younger son feels is a privilege.

As He does this, is not Jesus also gently rebuking the Pharisees and teachers of the law? God longs for these tax collectors and "sinners" to return to Him. He rejoices when the lost are found. All heaven joins in the great celebration.

- So, if the Pharisees are part of God's family, why can't they rejoice when they see tax collectors flocking to hear the message announced by Jesus?
- If the teachers of the law are on the inside, why do they stand on the outside complaining about the welcome Jesus gives "sinners" who repent?

Are they disobeying the Father at this point?

Justice and Grace

As I read this familiar story, I find myself challenged. If I'm honest, I still find myself identifying with the elder brother. I think he's the one getting the raw deal. I can identify with his point of view.

How would I feel if someone like Ivan Milat repented on his death bed and went to heaven? There's that within me that wants to say: That's not fair. Here's a guy convicted of seven murders – and suspected of several more. As far as we know, none of these victims did anything to Milat. They hadn't hurt him. He wasn't killing them for revenge.

They were just random people he decided to torture and kill. This guy deserves to rot in hell. Where's the justice if God turns around and lets him into heaven? And how much more would I feel that if I was related to one of his victims?

If I scour the Bible as a whole, I can come up with all sorts of reasons as to why I shouldn't think like that.

- There are reasons to do with my own sinfulness. Sure, I haven't physically murdered anyone. Yet, I've rebelled against my Creator just like Milat. I've ignored Him and His wishes over and over again. That's horrendous. It's far worse than the murder of a mere human – as bad as that is. I deserve to rot in hell for the way I've treated God – and yet He's forgiven me.
- There are reasons to do with the nature of goodness. Goodness is greatly desirable. What could be more desirable? Yet, my sinful nature, being what it is, actually desires wickedness. I see people enjoying their wickedness and wish I could do that too. I think it's not fair if I've made all these sacrifices by trying to be good and then these people who've been wicked can just repent at the last moment and thus both enjoy their wickedness and get heaven too. My sinful nature has to learn that goodness is beneficial – not a sacrifice.
- There are reasons to do with forgiving others in the way God's forgiven you.
- There are reasons to do with loving your neighbour as yourself.

And so it goes on.

Yet, the reason Jesus gives here has to do with sharing

the joy of the Father. It has to do with the Father's longing to see the lost return. It has to do with the heart of the Father that doesn't want anyone to perish but longs for all to come to repentance. And the father says to the elder son: That's what I want you to be like.

- I want you to share my heart in this.
- I want you to long for the lost to repent and come to their senses.
- I want you to celebrate the recovery of those who return to me in humility and submission.

And I recognise that my heart still falls far short.

- I can quite comfortably enjoy my middle-class Christian lifestyle while I wait for Jesus to return.
- I can pass people in the street without bothering about their eternal destiny.
- I can be more interested in longing for God's justice than in celebrating God's mercy.

One of the dangers I've found in the Christian life is to think that I somehow deserve it. In my head, I know that's not true. I know what the Bible says: that we're all sinners deserving of God's judgment. And I know that I've sinned – I could never try to deny that. And I know that I still sin – often.

- Yet, I'm still tempted to play the comparison game – to compare myself with others who aren't as good or morally upright.
- And I'm still tempted to play the "look what I've done" game – to list off the sacrifices I've made and the ministry I've been involved in.

And I'm tempted to think: Yeah, I can understand why God chose to rescue me. I'm a pretty good sort. That sort of thinking quickly leads to the elder brother's attitude –

because it's moving back towards justice instead of grace. It's comparing myself with others with a view to measuring what I deserve. I'll look down on those I think don't measure up to my standard. I'll begin to despise them. I won't go searching for them. I'll get upset if God searches for them. And I won't celebrate with the Father when He finds them. I won't share the joy that flows from the expression of His grace.

The Lord's Supper is a great reminder of the stupidity of that sort of thinking.

- It reminds me of my own sinfulness. I don't deserve anything good from God – only judgment. Any good I receive from Him is only because of His grace and mercy to me.
- It reminds me of the price paid for my sin – the death on the cross of the eternal Son of God – Him taking on Himself the judgment I deserved.
- It reminds me that my place at God's great banquet table is solely on the basis of His grace. There's no other way I can sit at that table.

And so that should cause me to celebrate the Father's grace to me. And if I'm truly celebrating that for myself, how can I not also celebrate it when others likewise repent and discover the Father's gracious heart?

As I pondered this parable, I think there's another way I'm like the elder brother. As I survey the harvest field in Australia, where do I tend to focus my efforts? Middle-class non-Christians. There are various reasons for that.

- That's the class to which I belong whether I like it or not. I'm already an insider. I don't have to make great cultural shifts to relate to them.
- I don't fit with the upper class. I don't think like

them. I don't value the same things they value. If I'm honest with myself, I suspect they're too far gone in their materialism to give up their idolatry for God.

- I don't fit with the lower class either. They too seem to have different interests to me. They seem to have a totally different mindset – especially when it comes to their attitude to education and how they budget and handle money.

But, if I'm honest with myself, I think there's an attitude there that's pretty close to that of the Pharisees. It's not in terms of sinfulness – the Australian middle-class is quite committed to its idolatry to greed. I've got no doubts about that. Rather, it's in terms of how I perceive their usefulness to God's kingdom.

- These guys are educated.
- These guys have trained talents.
- These guys know how to make money.
- These guys have made it in the modern world.

These are the sort of guys God should be interested in having in His kingdom. They could make a great positive contribution to the progress of the gospel. It'd be a great advantage to have these people in the church. This is the sort of people I'd like to see become Christians. I think Jesus should be spending more time with this group. That's not how Jesus thinks.

Conclusion

The Father's in the rescue business. That's what He's been on about since Adam and Eve blew it in the Garden of Eden. His rescue business is for all those who know they need rescuing. Actually, it's for all those who need rescuing full-stop – but the fact is, only those who realise

their great need of rescue are the ones who'll make use of His business. People who think they're already OK – no matter what the basis of their thinking – simply won't bother asking to be rescued.

Further than that, the Father takes great delight in His business. It gives Him great joy when someone repents – when someone changes direction in life – when someone is rescued from their godless lifestyle and comes home to the Father's embrace. He celebrates. And He wants all those who claim to share His heart – that is, all those who've already been rescued – to celebrate with Him.