

Jubilee of Mercy – Parables of Mercy: The Lost Son

The third parable in Luke 15, the Lost Son (15:11-32), is the longest and most intricate of Christ's teachings about the nature of God's mercy and the response to seeing that mercy shown to others. Unlike the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin parables, this time it's a person, not an animal or an inanimate object, that's lost. And the actions of the three characters – the father and his two sons – develop the lesson in greater depth.

The son who demands his inheritance and then goes off and squanders it – unlike the sheep or the coin – becomes aware of just how lost he is. He hits rock bottom and realizes it's his own fault – “Coming to his senses,” as Jesus says. He knows his father's goodness towards his hired workers, yet does not perceive just how merciful his father might be. He does not seek reinstatement to his position in the family – the most he hopes for is that his father might treat him as a hired hand. And so he rehearses his apology with that goal in mind and sets out to return home.

Meanwhile, the father has never given up on his son, but is continually watching for him to return. *“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion”* (15:20). The father must have been looking for him frequently, to have spotted him *“while still a long way off”* – his son may have been out of sight, but was never out of mind. The father could have smugly thought, “Look who's coming back – the one who blew his inheritance! What does he expect from me?” Rather, he was *“filled with compassion.”* So much so that he didn't wait for him to arrive, but *“ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him”* (15:20). Then as the son begins his rehearsed plea, the father cuts him off, ordering the servants to dress him in finery and begin a feast to celebrate, *“because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found”* (15:24). The father's mercy was even greater than the son had imagined – he's welcomed back, not as a hired hand, but as a family member. He's not just given a place at table, he's the guest of honor. His return is heralded as a return to life from death. The father's mercy brings great joy to his household!

But there's a cloud on the horizon of this joy – the elder son's anger and resentment over his father's actions. He complains that his obedience has gone unrewarded. He doesn't even acknowledge his relationship to his sibling, referring to him not as “my brother,” but as “your son.” This is the point of the parable that Jesus aims at the scribes and Pharisees who had been critical of His association with sinners. They considered themselves to be the ones faithful to the Covenant, heirs to its promises, deserving of its rewards. The sinners don't belong in their company, and Jesus shouldn't waste his time with them.

But the father was as caring and merciful with the elder son as he was with the younger. *“When (the elder son) refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him”* (15:28). He didn’t leave him alone or command him to come in, but reached out to him, going out to *plead* with him. And after the son aired his complaint, the father said, *“My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours”* (15:31). No rebuttal, no offense taken, just a gentle reminder that he is his son, always faithful, the heir to everything. Nothing the father has done in showing mercy to the younger son has taken anything away from the older son’s status. *“But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found”* (15:32). The father reinforces the family relationship – *“your bother”* – and declares the cause for joy: that one who was dead returned to life, that one who was lost has been found.

This goes to the core of the matter with the scribes and Pharisees – they tried to divide the House of Israel between those scrupulously observant of the rules (themselves) and the sinners. Jesus’ point is that God’s mercy towards sinners doesn’t take anything away from those who observed His commands. Rather, it reunites His People in the eternal bond of His love.

Instead of resentment, the faithful should rejoice that God forgives sinners and welcomes them back, strengthening the community. For we can acknowledge that we, too, have sinned and been forgiven. We have strayed, gotten lost, and been found. We have gone from the death of sin to the eternal life promised in the resurrection.

When we reflect on the Parable of the Lost Son, we might see ourselves as the elder son, faithful to the Father’s commands, yet chafing at His show of mercy to sinners. Or we might see ourselves as the younger son, wasteful of our abilities, needing to return to the Father’s house, hopeful of His mercy. But the one we should see ourselves as is neither the elder nor the younger son – we should become more and more like the merciful and loving Father.

Our goal: to live the Motto of the Jubilee Year of Mercy – “Merciful Like the Father.”

- We don’t **deserve** God’s mercy because of what we’ve done – we **need** it because of what we’ve done.
- We cannot **earn** God’s mercy – He **bestows** it, generously and lovingly.
- God doesn’t show us mercy because of **who we are**, but because of **who He is**.

“Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his mercy endures forever” (Ps 118:1).