Luke 15:1-2 reads: “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.’” The notorious, sinful, irreligious, and outcast gathered to hear Jesus. Representatives of the religious establishment were also present. They wanted to hear this upstart rabbi to catch him saying something to use against him. Even better, they wanted to catch him doing something to discredit him. Jesus shared food, friendship, and fellowship with the cast of ragamuffins around him. Erroneously thinking they have a monopoly on God, these religious leaders conclude Jesus could not be a man of God, much less the Son of God. God would not receive sinners and eat with them. So, they grumbled against Jesus.

In Luke 15:3-32 Jesus responded by telling the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Theses parables make one point: Lost people matter to God. To a degree, these parables depend on each other. To understand one is to understand them all. They share a common outline: (1) A valuable possession is lost; (2) the lost thing is recovered; (3) a party is thrown to celebrate. To ignore the unity of these parables is to get to the movie late or leave early. You miss something by not seeing it all. But do not join these parables at the hip so they cannot stand alone. These stories make beautiful music together. But they also sing sweetly as soloists. Though they address the same theme, their differing details give them distinct nuances.

- They have different protagonists: a shepherd, a woman, and a father.
- There are different lost things: a lamb, a coin, and a son.
- The lost things have different proportional value: the lamb is 1/100, the coin is 1/10, and the son is 1/2.
- They get lost in different places: in the field, in the house, and in the far country.
- The lost things have different natures: the lamb is dumb; the coin is inanimate; and the son is volitional.
- These valuables get lost in different ways: the lamb through preoccupation; the coin through negligence, the son through miscalculation.
- There are different responses to the lost things: the shepherd purposely neglects the ninety-nine, the woman turns her house upside down, and the father sits on the porch and waits.

These parables are united but unique. They come to the same address, but take different avenues to get there. These stories are interdependent. All too often, when we consider this third parable, we ignore the symmetrical point it makes in connection to the first two. Because it is longer, more dramatic, and better than the first two parables, we forget it also makes the point that lost people matter to God.

We call this story: THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON. But it is not about the prodigal son. Verse 11 says: “There was a man who had two sons.” The father is the star of this story. The role of the prodigal son is only significant to the degree that he spotlights the
love of the father. The younger boy is no more significant than the elder brother. In fact, the award for best actor in a supporting role should not go to the prodigal son or the elder brother. It should go to the fattened calf. The elder brother was not mad because his brother came home. He was upset that when he returned, the father killed the fattened calf for him. The prodigal son speaks to the tax collectors and sinners. The elder brother speaks to the scribes and Pharisees. But the father is the one doing the talking. He declares that lost people matter to God.

I. THE FATHER ALLOWED HIS SON TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HIM.

This parable is rooted in divine paternity, which is the primary picture of God in the New Testament. God is our heavenly Father in Christ, who provides what his children need. In fact, God the Father even provides things we do not need. This is not contrast between needs and wants. I am suggesting that in his sovereign prodigality, God gives what we do not deserve, have no right to ask for, and do not know what to do with. The parable of the prodigal son is a case in point.

Verses 11-12 reads: “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ One day, this boy comes home and said to his Father, “Dad, I have an inheritance coming when you die. But I can’t wait any longer. I want what’s coming to me now!’” What an incredible request! By demanding his cut of his father’s loot while he was still alive, this boy was saying to his Father, “I wish you were dead.” He did not want a relationship with his father. He just wanted his father’s stuff. The only thing more shocking than this son’s request is the father’s response. Verse 12 says: “And he divided his property between them.” It should read: “So the father slapped this stupid boy in his mouth and sent him to his room. The end.” Yet the father executed his will and gave the younger son one third of his estate.

Verse 13 says, “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.” After getting his money, the boy packed everything to leave home for good. He traveled to the “far country” to start a new life. Where was this far country? We do not know. You will not find it in a Bible atlas or map of the ancient Near East. But geography is not the issue. The “far country” was where the father was not.

This young man insulted his father, took his money, and got as far from his father as he could. Why did this father let his son take advantage of him? No parent would respond the way this father did. Why did the father do it? Love made him do it. Some parents give children anything they want in the name of love. But over-indulgence is not love. It is weak, foolish, and irresponsible parenting. But true love caused this father to allow his son to take advantage of him. The Father loved him and wanted a relationship based on love. This is the heartbeat of God. God wants to have a personal relationship with us based on love. For that to happen, God must let us be free to reject him. To win
our hearts, God must subject himself to a broken-heart. To have a relationship with us based on love, he must put himself in a position where we can take advantage of him.

Some people serve God because of rules. They view God as an angry tyrant, waiting to body-slam every sinner into Hell. They think God is watching and waiting for them to commit the tiniest infraction of his laws, so he can rain down wrath on them. But that’s not God and that’s not what he is about. Others serve God because of reward. If the former group views God as an angry tyrant, these view God as Santa Claus. They picture God in a throne room filled with presents for those who are nice. They try to please God so they don’t get coal in their stockings. But that’s not God and that’s not what he is about. God wants us to serve him because of relationship. For God to have his heart’s desire, he must let himself be taken advantage of. He must allow himself to be offended, used, and rejected for a season. The only way God can get us to love him is by giving us the right not to love him.

A king saw a peasant girl and immediately fell in love. Because of his high position and her lowly estate, he had to proceed strategically. He could give a royal mandate and make her marry him. But you cannot demand true love. Or he could shower her with gifts to sweep her off her feet. But you cannot buy true love. So he dressed himself as a peasant and went into the field to work beside her. A relationship ensued. It got to a point where she loved him so much that it did not matter who he was, king or commoner. Only then was it safe to reveal his identity.

II. THE FATHER LOVED EAGERLY AWAITED HIS SON’S RETURN.

There is good news and bad news here. I’ll give you the good news first.

A. GOD IS WAITING FOR YOU TO COME HOME!

I do not know any parent who would have honored this boy’s selfish request. If a parent would do it, I could only see it happening with anger, disgust, and finality. Something like this: “Okay, I’ll give you the money. But while I’m writing the check, go pack your bags.” Shortly afterwards, the boy comes down the stairs from his room with his bags to find his daddy with check in hand waiting at the front door. The father hands the check to the boy and slams the door on him as he exits, only after he has spoken his final words, “And don’t come back!” But that is not what this father does. The father waited for his son to come home. He left the door open for his son. He left his room prepared for his return. He kept his place at the table set. He even started fattening a calf for the homecoming celebration. The father eagerly awaited his son’s return. The good news is that you may have wasted God’s fortune, but you have not exhausted God’s love.
• No matter what you have done, God still loves you.
• No matter what you have done, God still cares about you.
• No matter what you have done, God still wants you.
• No matter what you have done, God still has a place for you in his family.

Am I talking to you? Have you left the Fathers house? Are you in the far country? Has your heart rebelled against God? I have good news for you. God is waiting for you to come back home!

A high schooler left home after a fight with his parents. But he later felt awful and wanted to come home. But he was too ashamed to ask their forgiveness in person. So, he wrote a letter of apology. He told them he would be driving by the house the next day. If they forgave him and he could return, they should hang the blue sheets from his bed on the clothesline as a sign. When he passed by the next day, he was shocked by what he saw. The parents had been up all night and dyed all the sheets in the house blue and hung them in the yard! God did not hang sheets on a line. But he hung his son on the cross to declare he is waiting for you to come home.

B. GOD IS WAITING FOR YOU TO COME BACK HOME!

When the sheep was lost, the shepherd searched until he found it. When the piece of silver was lost, the woman searched carefully until she found it. But that is not the case in this parable. The father did not look for his son. He did not file a missing person’s report with the police. He did not put his son’s picture on the side of a milk carton. He waited. If he wanted his son home so badly, why did he not search for him, like the protagonists in the first two stories? Remember the nature of the son. Sheep are dumb animals prone to wander. Coins are inanimate objects that cannot lose themselves. But this boy was a free moral agent. He chose to leave. And he must choose to come home. Likewise, God will not go to the far country and drag you out of the bar or kidnap you from your hoodlum friends. He is not going to force you home and lock you in your room. You must make the decision to come home.

A man was given a check for a sizable amount by a multi-millionaire. He went to the bank to cash it. But the teller said she could not do it. He asked if she heard of the man who gave him the check. She had. He asked if she knew how much he was worth. She did. Then he demanded to know why she could not cash the check. She responded, “You haven’t endorsed it.”

The blood of Jesus is sufficient to pay for your sins. But you must endorse it by faith. You must run to the cross. You must come home. This young man wasted his inheritance on the ultimate spring-break in the big city. But when it was time to pay the bill, his small fortune was depleted. And he hit rock bottom. Verses 17-19 says: “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but 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. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” This is the
turning point of the story. The young man came to his senses. He woke up and realized he did not have to live the way he was living. Because your heavenly Father is who he is, you do not have to be what you have been. You can come home today.

III. THE FATHER FREELY RESTORED HIS SON WITH JOY.

Notice two aspects of the father’s restoration of his wayward son.

A. THE FATHER FREELY RESTORED HIS WAYWARD SON.

Verses 17-19 says: “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but 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. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ As the boy returned home, he prepared a speech that included an apology and request for work. In verse 12, he said to his father, “Give me…” in verse 19 he plans to say to his father, “Treat me as one of your hired servants.” He wanted to negotiate his way back into the house by asking for a job as a bond servant. Little did he know that his father had been waiting and watching for him to come home. Verse 20 says, “And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

When the father saw his returning son, he was moved with compassion – not anger, disgust, or apprehension. This is our God. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Moved with compassion, the father ran to meet the prodigal. In the ancient Near East, men of age, wealth, or status did not run. It is remarkable that in Luke 19, Zacchaeus ran and climbed a tree to see Jesus. Men did not do that. But this Father ran to meet his son. God is willing to lose his dignity to get his children back home. He overtook his son, embraced him, and showered him with kisses. Once they caught their composure, the boy started his prepared speech. But his father cut him off, saying, “I don’t want to hear it. All that matters is that you’re home.” This is the restoring grace of God. No one has gone so far that he cannot come home. The finished work of Christ has paid the price for you to be restored to God. What sin is keeping you from God? Let me give you the right answer in four words: IT. DOES. NOT. MATTER. Come home to God and be restored!

B. THE FATHER JOYFULLY RESTORED HIS WAYWARD SON.

Verses 22-24 says; “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.

The father ordered the servants to bring the best robe and put it on his son. The best robe was reserved for the man of the house. The father said, “Go get my robe and put it on my son.” This is what God did for us at the cross. He clothed us in his righteousness. **2 Corinthians 5:21** says: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” He also ordered them to put a signet ring on his son’s finger, to symbolize his authority in the house. And he ordered them to put sandals on his feet. Servants go barefoot, not sons. Finally, he ordered them to kill the fattened calf. It was time for a party. With this call for celebration, we reach the punch-line of **Luke 15**. The religious leaders ask: “If Jesus knows God, why is he partying with sinners?” Jesus asks: “If you know God, why haven’t you joined the party?” That’s the point of **Luke 15**: JOIN THE PARTY!

All three parables have celebrations. But this is the mother-of-all parties. It has an element the first two do not have. In verse 6, the shepherd said to his neighbors and friends, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost!” It is a lost-and-found party. In verse 9, the woman said to her neighbors and friends, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” It is a lost-and-found party. In verse 24, the father says, “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” This is not just a lost-and-found party. It’s a dead-and-alive party. They celebrated because the son was alive again. But for them to party, the fattened calf had to die. The fattened calf is the Christ figure in the story. It is because Jesus died that we have a reason to rejoice. It’s because he died that we can party. It’s because he died that we can celebrate.

The deacons examined a boy that wanted to join the church. They asked, “How did you get saved?” His answer was, “God did his part, and I did my part.” They thought something was wrong with his doctrine, so they questioned further, “What was God’s part and what was your part?” He explained, “My part was the sinning; God’s part was the saving.”

I WAS SINKING DEEP IN SIN, FAR FROM THE PEACEFUL SHORE
VERY DEEPLY STAINED WITHIN, SINKING TO RISE NO MORE
BUT THE MASTER OF THE SEA HEARD MY DESPAIRING CRY
AND FROM THE WATERS LIFTED ME, NOW SAVED AM I

LOVE LIFTED ME; LOVE LIFTED ME
WHEN NOTHING ELSE COULD HELP, LOVE LIFTED ME