

The Surprise of the Father

Luke 15: 1 – 3, 11 – 32

Gereformeerde Kerk Potchefstroom Die Bult

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Introduction

At my home church in Pennsylvania, one of the last sermons I heard before leaving to come here was entitled: "The God of the Old Testament: Is He a Violent, Malevolent Monster?"

Our pastor began his sermon with a quotation about God from Richard Dawkins's book, THE GOD DELUSION which was exceptionally negative and which gave expression to many stereotypes, some of which are as present in the evangelical Reformed community as they are in the secular community.

I remember well the comment made to me personally by an outstanding Christian leader to the effect that, "Of course, any homosexual is going to Hell. There can be no doubt about that."

As much as I resist Dawkins's arguments, I have to admit that some of us act and speak in ways that give credence to what he thinks God is like – an angry, judgmental monster, eager to inflict judgment on anyone He doesn't like.

I would like us to think for a few minutes this morning about the portrait of God given in Luke 15. The source of this portrait is Jesus Himself and He is responding to an attitude toward God's nature not so very different from the ones I just cited.

I. The Context

While it is the third of these stories that is my real focus, must see that third story in context of first two and, even more important, in context of verses 1 and 2 of chapter 15:

Luke 15:1-2

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Jesus]. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

In response to this grumbling, Jesus tells three parables. Not 3 doctrinal postulates; not 3 historical narratives; but three short stories.

Why all the grumbling? Not completely different from Peter's reaction in Acts 10 when first invited to eat wild and weird and unclean animals. Remember that? -

Acts 10:14

But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

So let's be fair to Pharisees and scribes - all through the Old Testament, God's people urged to "come out from among the pagans and be separate." The first 2 chapters of Judges describe God's anger when Israel mixed with Canaanites. The Pharisees were just reflecting that reality in their reaction to Jesus.

And let's not forget that Luke affirms that these people with whom Jesus is spending time ARE sinners! That is an INERRANT statement. Clear indication from text that these people were *notorious and public sinners*. And Jesus seems actually to welcome them! This a REAL problem in the culture of the Bible.

Behind the grumbling of the Pharisees lay many things, some of them anchored solidly in appropriate biblical tradition.

One of our problems in appreciating the power of this text is that we don't have the same attitude toward tax collectors today as was the case in Jesus's day. And the word "sinners" is so broad that we find no clear offense there either.

But what if the passage were understood to say that Jesus received and ate with racists?

That He received and ate with prostitutes?

That He received and ate with child molesters?

That He received and ate with practicing homosexuals?

That would make the impact of the passage closer to that which it had in Jesus's own day.

In no way did Jesus's "receiving" and "eating with" sinners imply an endorsement of their sin. That must be *vigorously* and *regularly* affirmed. Remember, Jesus is the One who said that if your eye tends to lead you into sin, it would be better for you to rip it out of your head than to follow that lead.

But His receiving and eating with sinners did reveal the essence of His personal way of responding to them and, therefore, it did reveal His very nature and that of His Father with whom He said He was ONE!

This is the situation at the beginning of Luke 15.

So, no matter how much theoretically good tradition might lie behind the grumbling, it was just that - grumbling. And in response, Jesus tells three stories.

Why? What was Jesus trying to do?

On one level, Jesus was trying to defend the appropriateness of His actions. But He could have done this with a strongly worded theological exposition of such passages as Isaiah 2, which describes the coming of the pagan nations to the mountain of the Lord.

Jesus could have done this. But He didn't.

Instead, He told three stories.

And I would suggest that He told these stories - parables - in order to change grumbling to relishing, and, if this is true, then it is clear that the stories are focused DIRECTLY on the person with whom the Pharisees were upset - Jesus.

Verses 3 - 32 are, therefore, primarily about God Himself, specifically about Jesus, the Divine Son of God.

II. Luke 15: 3 - 7 often called "Parable of the Lost Sheep"

Better title – "Parable of the Seeking Shepherd."

Key verse - 6

And when the shepherd comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

The point - this just the kind of shepherd you would want if you a lost sheep.

III. Luke 15: 8 - 10 often called "Parable of the Lost Coin"

Better title "Parable of the Searching Woman"

Key verse 9

And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

The point - this just the kind of owner you would want if you were a lost coin

IV. Luke 15: 11 - 32 often called the "Parable of the Prodigal Son"

Better title "Parable of the Running Father"

Key verses - 20 - 24

And he [the Prodigal Son] 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. [21] 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.'

[22] 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. [23] And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. [24] For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

The point - This is just the kind of father you would want if you were a disobedient child

V. All these stories about the person who seeks and carries and sweeps and searches and runs and rejoices.

The subject of the third parable is the father, not either of the sons. Crucial to remember this.

There may be some parallels between older son and Pharisees and between younger son and the sinners and tax collectors who came to Jesus in verses 1 and 2. But the sons are not the focus of the story. MANY problems with trying to over-interpret the meaning of the sons.

The third parable is all about the Father.

Remember that - it is all about the Father.

Why did Jesus speak this parable? His purpose was to turn grumbling to relishing, relishing the Father BECAUSE HE WAS AND IS A FATHER who AMAZES us with his grace and love.

VI. What characteristics this father lead to relishing?

Oh, my.

Throw out adjectives:

Wealthy

Lavish provider

Patient - BOTH sons.

Remember this - neither son treated his father as the father deserved. In the parable, neither son had any justification whatsoever for the way he acted toward his father. BOTH sons treated the father with selfish disdain. Gimme, gimme, gimme!!

You have riches that I want, so give them to me NOW and give them to me ONLY.

No respect, no honor, no real devotion to the father himself.

And with BOTH of these brats this father is patient, loving, and giving.

And he is not passively patient, either.

This father is ACTIVE in relationship with sons - running, embracing, kissing, celebrating

Anyone here NOT want such a father? Anyone here not RELISH this kind of father?

And the really neat thing this that these three parables are themselves instances of Fatherly running.

The Pharisees grumbled and Jesus could LEGITIMATELY have just zapped them with immediate judgment. Who are they to be questioning the Son of God?

But no - Jesus responds patiently with stories designed to help them change grumbling to relishing so they, too, participate in the family celebrations when a brother who was dead is found to be alive, when a son who was lost is found.

In the Parable of the Running Father, the heavenly father is Himself running to meet the Scribes and Pharisees, just as he had run to meet sinners and tax collectors.

And that tells us even more about this Father!

He is AMAZING! Almost unbelievable!! You can KNOW that, no matter what, He is constantly looking over horizon, searching for you.

And when he sees you,

no matter where you have been;

no matter what you have done;

no matter how long you have been away;

no matter how many times you have left Him, . . . when he sees you turning toward home, he is off like a shot to welcome you.

And my, my, my, can he throw a party for you!

This father never rejects homeward bound child. He did not reject younger son; he did not reject older son. They both were His and they both received His lavish love!

And He, in the person of Jesus, did not reject those grumbling Pharisees, either.

Simply by telling these three parables, Jesus was verbally RUNNING toward them with His message of grace and love.

B. There is one last complication in this narrative . . . but it is a glorious complication.

The Parable of the Running Father tells part of the story . . . But there are other chapters and among those chapters is the one which deals with the HOW.

HOW can the Father run and embrace and celebrate with older sons and younger sons alike, with both Pharisees and Tax Collectors?

HOW in the world can sinful sons and prideful Pharisees can be brought to turn and return and worship?

How much did it really cost this Father to take the run He did?

These words of one of my favorite songs answer these critically important questions:

**"The Power of the Cross"
Words and Music by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend**

**Oh, to see the pain
Written on Your face,
Bearing the awesome weight of sin.
Ev'ry bitter thought,
Ev'ry evil deed**

Crowning Your bloodstained brow.

**Now the daylight flees;
Now the ground beneath
Quakes as its Maker bows His head.
Curtain torn in two,
Dead are raised to life;
"Finished!" the vict'ry cry.**

**This, the pow'r of the cross:
Son of God; slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.**

The amazing love of the father becomes all the more so when the COST of his running is considered.

But I entitled this sermon, "The Surprise of the Father." Why in the world?

Why not just keep what I suggested as the proper title of the third parable – "The Parable of the Running Father?"

Because there is one more thing which Jesus does, especially in that third parable - He presents God as "the Father of Surprises."

I don't know what the younger son was thinking when he first asked for his inheritance but I suspect he was surprised by his father's response. "Sure; you asked for your inheritance. Here it is."

"WOW! Really?! Just like that??" Yes, just like that.

I do know what the younger son was expecting when he returned because Jesus tells us – he expected judgment; he expected anger; he expected what he deserved . . . and he was surprised when his father gave him something else.

Don't lose this aspect of Jesus's parable. Put it together with such other Scriptural passages as I Corinthians 2:9, which one translation renders this way:

**No one's ever seen or heard anything like this,
Never so much as imagined anything quite like it—
What God has arranged for those who love him.**

No matter how amazing you THINK God's grace is, in the end, this Father is going to surprise you because His ways are as far above our ways as the heavens are above the earth.

Think about those Old Testament prophecies which we now know were fulfilled in Jesus – far more majestically than anyone in the Old Testament could even imagine. Think just of Isaiah 53 – the Suffering Servant passages; could anyone have dared even to think that that servant, that despised, rejected, bruised and oppressed servant would be God Himself in the Person of His Only Son?

Or how about Isaiah 61? Before Jesus’s resurrection, could anyone possibly have guessed ALL that it would mean for the Servant of the Lord to “proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound”? Not likely. As great a prophet as Isaiah was, I think it is safe to say he would have been – and WAS – surprised.

Now remember this – it is a NEW TESTAMENT writer, Paul himself, who says that no one can even imagine the glories which God has arranged for those who love Him. I think Paul expected to be surprised by what God was actually going to do! I think Paul expected to be just as surprised by the reality of God’s actions as Isaiah was.

Does someone you love seem to be far from Christ? Are you worried about them? Yes, be concerned. Yes, pray. Yes, live the Gospel into their lives.

But remember that your God is a running Father who always surprises those who love Him with His stupifyingly amazing grace.

Always remember this principle which is clear as we move from the Old Testament to the New and beyond – This Heavenly Father always UNDERpromises and OVERdelivers.

That’s no less true of the promises God makes in the Book of Revelation than it was of the promises He made in the Book of Isaiah.

Anticipate –with delight and joy and worship – what this surprising, running Father will do.

VIII. And this, to return to where we started, is why Jesus spoke in parables and why we sing songs like “The Power of the Cross.”

**It simply not enough to know that God is the Creator and Redeemer. The DEVIL knows this!!
But he is still the devil!**

The Parable of the Running Father is intended to lead its hearers to SENSE, to feel in their hearts, the *worthiness* of the father. It is to lead hearers of the parable to LOVE this father, even to WORSHIP this father. It thus tells an incredibly powerful truth in a way that is meant to accomplish that truth in the hearts of the hearers.

To what end? What did Jesus ultimately want to happen in the lives of those scribes and Pharisees?

Not just that they would cease their grumbling.

Not just that they would stop criticizing Jesus.

But that they would join Him in receiving and eating with sinners to the end that those sinners might return to their Father and bring delight to His heart.

That's what it's all about – this running Father of surprises deserves our worship, deserves our praise.

Let's do it!