

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 - Lent 4
Whose Counting Sins?
With reference to 2 Corinthians 5:19
Engaging the Reality of God - Part 4

March 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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

³ So he told them this parable:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

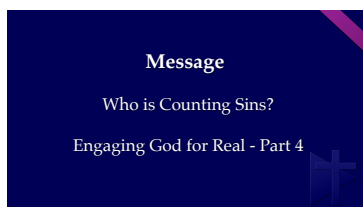
¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"²⁰ 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. 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.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, **in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.** ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Intro:



We have just heard a precious story from Jesus. This is a story I try to preach every year because it brings us the Father's heart as Jesus described it and debunks wrong images of God.

This passage also speaks as the fourth part of my Lenten series on engaging the reality of God. How might you get to *yada*-know God personally and intimately? ¹

My sub-title for this week in preaching the parable is: Engaging the reality of God through sin.

I am going to suggest that repentance for sin creates an opportunity to personally encounter the heart of God. If sin is a feature of your past or present life this might be of life changing interest. There is very good news for the sinner who wants to know God.

¹ To read/hear about *yada*-knowledge go to the first talk in this series at <https://trinitychurcheindhoven.org/sermons/03032019/>

Before we pick up the parable let me ask a question:

Q: What is the big issue with sin? Why is it so serious?

Take 30 seconds to compare notes with someone.

Why is Sin such a serious is issue?

A: I can think of two categories that cover the possibilities.

1) Sin breaks relationship.

- a. This leads to separation between persons at every level.
- b. This is the main concern of the Bible.
- c. Without a relationship with God people are lost and dead.

2) Sin disrupts the order of things.

- a. This includes disturbing the peace, breaking the law, causing hurt, disrupting society and causing damage.
 - i. It's a loss of equilibrium.
 - ii. It's a disease that needs to be contained and eradicated.
- b. This is the main concern of civil law and justice.

Anything else?

Whether sin is viewed as being about disrupting order or breaking relationships will determine what justice is thought to be.

Is justice about protecting restoring some agreed model of order as police and law courts work towards, or is it about restoring relationship as in marriage counselling or restorative justice?

This is a question I see Jesus addressing in his parable about the lost son.

I am going to suggest that in the story only the Father understood sin as broken relationship with the consequences of lost-ness and death.

What I am going to say about engaging the reality of God is that when we appreciate this, sin becomes an opportunity to engage God personally in a life-transforming way. I'll come back to this.

The Text

Let's begin with the first verses of Luke chapter 15 which sets up the context for three parables about the lost being found: The lost sheep, The lost coin and what we are now reading, The lost son.

Here was the context Jesus addressed:

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."



The Religious experts grumbled, as they tended to do around Jesus.² They saw what Jesus was doing and it clashed with both their understanding of how a godly person should relate to known sinners and of sin

² The Greek word here for 'grumble' is fun to say! γόγγυζον / gonguzon is an onomatopoeic term imitating the sound of cooing doves

itself. For them people who broke social and religious codes of ethics threatened society and the standing of the Jewish People before God. So the solution was sin management through separation from sinners. Keep the sinners over there and the good people over here. Jesus did not comply with that policy as he was sharing food and social intimacy with professional sinners.

Jesus was not unaware. He knew who he was with and he knew what the religious guardians of the Jewish People were thinking.

Q: So why was Jesus breaking the established understanding of sin and what to do about it? Why did he receive and eat with tax collectors and prostitutes?

A: Because the established understanding of sin was not true to God as he knew him and was simply inadequate. To make that point clear he told three parables climaxing in the Parable of the lost son.

Text Development

I'll assume this story is familiar and draw out a few relevant points:

This is a traditional family farm estate. Wealth is held by the patriarch of the family and passed on as inheritance at his death. Until then the sons live, marry and raise their families within the family estate. Such a patriarch in the ancient world was a man of dignity and poise. He never ran. His word was law on his land and his children did as he required so long he lived.

The younger son is impatient. It boils in him towards the day when he says to his Father that he is fed up with waiting for when the Father dies. He wants his inheritance now. The old man and his boring brother can enjoy the rest.

The insult in this is immense.

"Dad you are no use alive to me."

This is the same essential impulse behind the rebellion of Adam and Eve and the builders of the Tower of Babel. Why depend on God's benevolent provision and care when you can grab for it yourself? Move over old man and let me live as I want in my entitlement now. I don't need you and I don't want you. Your money, your information, your wisdom is worth more to me than being in relationship with you. This is what sets up the human condition. This is the primal rebellion.

Jesus' listeners would have been horrified at what he described here. The Father neither protests nor resists. He provides the wicked boy what he asked for and interestingly gives the older son his share too. It looks as if all liquid assets are dispersed.

What the younger son has done is turn his back on his Father, his family, his heritage and his land to the extent that he does not have much of him self left.

A few days later he is off to a far country with his possessions where everything is for sale.

¹³ ... and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

Easy come, easy go!

He had already given up family, heritage, history and place, now his money is gone with false friends and the when food runs out he is about to loose more. He sinks to the level of swineherd with the job of

feeding animals unclean for Jews and being so hungry he desired their food. He has sunk to the lowest of the low and there is no mercy from anyone.

This young man is now totally lost: lost from home, lost from family, lost from dignity, lost from his faith and most seriously, lost from himself. He does not know who he is anymore.

Have you been there?

It's not famine that does this today so much as stress and burn out in a cold empty world.

Loosing oneself can be like being without an inner spark and feeling so small that anything can push you under.

Meanwhile, not much happens among the pigs so he has time to be. Somehow in the mystery of resilience and spiritual recovery 'he comes back to himself', or as I once experienced it, his self came back to him.³

With some sense of his self regained he began to connect the experiences of his life and consider a way forward. From v.17:

Luke 15:17-19
¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

Let's look at how the starving man in the pig pen analyses the fact of the situation. He says:

1. I am very hungry
2. My Father's employees get all the bread they need

Then he makes an assumption and applies some logic:

But IF I -

- A. go to my father
- B. confess my sins to him
- C. give up rights as a son in the house

= I could ask to be taken on as an employee with 3 meals a day.

The issue driving him is hunger. He could die with the pigs and no one would care.

Now let's ask -as discussed earlier- what is sin to him? Is his thinking about relationship or order?

To my eyes he analyses his sin and considered what he can do to warrant consideration as an employee worth his daily bread. Thus his Father is primarily an instrument of provision and the food he craves for and a home.

So he counts up his sins against his Father. He does the math and offers the best terms he can in support of a plea for restoration against his guilt.

He has no idea that the Father might see him and his sin in very different way, not as a breaking of order and personal insult but as the loss of a dear son mourned and grieved for.

³ A tip for spiritual guides is to not rescue people from the pigpen. Until some sense of self and right perspective is restored, the pig pen is the right place – whatever form it takes. That is a Christian vision for prison. Stay there until you come back to your true self and recognise reality.



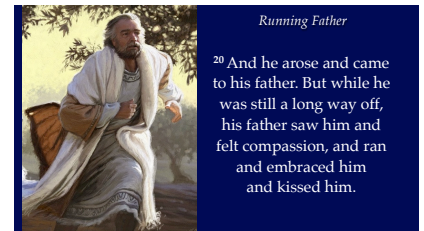
Rosaria Butterfield

In 1999 Rosaria Butterfield was an atheist lesbian tenured professor of literature and yet she came to faith in Christ. She is now married -to a man- and has four children. It's well worth listening to her story which is available on line. She says something the younger son was now about to learn. Speaking about her salvation she says she was not saved from being a lesbian, she was saved from being lost.

The biggest consequence of sin is being lost and effectively dead. The young man thought the issue was being hungry with the solution being to face up his many sins and make the best account he could. So that is what he set out to do.

The story now comes to its climax:

²⁰ 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. 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 (*interrupting him*) 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.



Running Father

²⁰ 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.

This is so beautiful:

The bad boy meets the good Father as he really is.

There is a Greek word translated as 'felt compassion' than opens up the power of this moment.

ἐσπλαγχνίσθη / *esplanchnisthē* It means to have the bowels yearn or to be moved as to one's bowels.

To work the English language, this was a powerful gutsy yearning of the Father for the son that overwhelmed him with emotion.

This is what drove the Father to bestow the ring, the shoes the cloak and throw a party with fresh veal.

²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'

If this Father represents the God and Father of Jesus Christ it says to us, the tragedy of sin to God is broken relationship that leads to lost-ness and death.

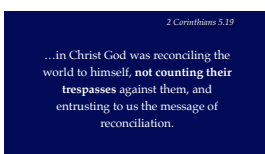
The Father was not interested in the prepared apology of the son.

He was not interested in accounting for the sins committed or his attempt at appeasement.

He was not interested in redefining the boy's legal standing.

The Father was totally focused on the fact that the boy had returned – he was back! That was the core of repentance that enabled restoration of relationship. He who was dead was alive again; he who was lost was found. Deep gutsy emotion flowed into deep joy.

Conclusion:



I have been trying to establish something that St Paul drew out in the Epistle we heard this morning: 2 Cor. 5:19

...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

God's response to our sin is not to count our trespasses but to seek reconciliation.

In the anti-climax of this parable, the older son processes what he sees happening with reference to the sins of the younger son, just as the younger son did about himself while in the pigpen.

That is what people do, until we have been infected with the love of the Father and live the message of reconciliation.

Jesus sat with the known public sinners well aware of their guilt as sinners but he saw them as lost and possibly dead. These were the lost ones for whom the Son of Man came to seek and save.

Like the Father in the parable, Jesus did not model an accounting, calculating and procedural recovery of order after satisfaction had been given. And some people grumbled!

Final Application

Q: What does this say about meeting God for real?

A: The younger son met his Father for real when he fell into his arms and was overwhelmed with mercy and grace. He would never be the same again.

The lesson is this.

Whatever sin you live with, past or present take it to God and you will know him as never before.

Don't count your sins or do the sums.

Don't allow something to stand between you and God even though no one knows about it and it was a long time ago.

Don't think you should quietly live with it just because non one knows when it could bring your best encounter with God.

Come home to the Father and meet him with your sin.

This is the Gospel of God not counting our sins in Christ but reconciling us when we turn to him.

Sin is the opportunity for such a personal encounter. From the various pigpen experiences of our life we may turn to God and trust his love to welcome and heal.

Epilogue

Romans 5:20-21

²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, *-it makes for counting-* but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through *God's saving* righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

