

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
February 16 & 17, 2013
John Crosby
The Essential Teachings of Jesus: Lost and Found
Luke 15**

Would you take out your Bibles, please, and turn to Luke, chapter 15. It's toward the end. We have been in a series all winter called *The Essential Teachings of Jesus*, words that give life. But what is the core of the core of the core of what Jesus tried to teach His followers? One of those places is in Luke, chapter 15, but as we said three weeks or so ago, it all rests on the most important thing that Jesus left us. So if you want to ask, what is the most important thing, what was His Commandment to us, we would look to see how He answered that question. Three weeks ago we called that the Jesus Creed. Jesus was asked, "What is the most important thing to do?" Jesus gave a great answer that we are going to try to repeat every week so we memorize it. Not just understand it or remember it, but memorize it so it goes from our heads into our hearts. So when somebody says, "What is the most important thing Jesus said?" we would be able to answer. Let's say it together.

(All:) ²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." [Mark 12:28-31]

I tried this with the Saturday night crowd, and it didn't go so well. You already read much better than they did. Then I asked them if they would be willing to try to take it to the next level, and I will also ask you. Let's see if you can give the answer to what is the greatest Commandment with your eyes closed. We'll try to do this every week so we get better and better, and by the end of our series, we will have Jesus' answer memorized. Close your eyes and repeat together,

(All:) ²⁹ 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Very good. We'll get there. Jesus took that creed and used it to introduce the idea of a Kingdom that He was coming to bring, a Kingdom where that would be the only law you really needed. Only two laws needed in this Kingdom, the rest take care of themselves, and He would be the King. We talked about how, in that Kingdom, we would learn to pray just like we were talking to somebody in the room, The Lord's Prayer. Today we want to try to take that message and make it visible by putting it into a story. What would life in the Kingdom look like? That's where Luke, chapter 15, comes in.

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So to answer those criticisms, Jesus tells stories. He tells the story of somebody who lost a coin. She looked all over and rejoiced when it was found. He tells the story of someone who lost his sheep and looked all over and when it was found, he rejoiced and everybody rejoiced with him.

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'"

If that's not underlined in your Bible, would you just underline *give me my share of the estate*. If it's already underlined, circle it. What's important is, you could hear the son saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead," but I really don't think that's what he is saying. I don't think he's wishing his father was dead. He just wants out of the family. He wants what's his *now*. He is saying to his father, literally, "I want your things, but I don't want you."

So he divided his property between them.

Again, underline the word *property*. If it's already underlined, circle it. It sounds pretty cold blooded but the reality is, in Greek, the original language, the word for property is *bios*, life. Biology, the study of life, comes from the word *bios*. When the father talks about dividing his estate, dividing his property, he is dividing the *bios*. That's because the land was so precious to the Jews. It was a gift from God, remember? And as a result, it represented life itself. They would have loved the musical *Oklahoma*. Remember in *Oklahoma*, "We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand." That's the way the Jews felt. So to give up one-third of your land would be like cutting off your arm in public because everybody would see that your son no longer loves you, but the father liquidated. Then it says,

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country,

Underline *distant country*, would you please. As far as the eye could see, there was no relief. There was no Red Cross. There was no World Vision. There was nobody to help, and he was a foreigner.

and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

It was forbidden for the Jews to feed pigs.

¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Underline this next phrase, *when he came to his senses*, please. I think it's the best one in the Bible. It says,

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’ ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off,

Again, underline *while he was still a long way off*. The reason you should underline that is, his father saw him while was still a long way off because he was spending half of his life now looking out the window, looking out across the gates of the city, looking into the field, and

his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him.

Underline *the best robe* just because it’s fun. I didn’t realize until I read it this time that the best robe in the house is whose? It’s the father’s. It’s the father’s dress robe. Think how the older brother is going to react to that!

Put a ring on his finger

The ring of our house. Give him back his identity as a part of our house.

and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

Obviously, underline *dead, alive, lost, and found*.

So they began to celebrate.

A great celebration. If Jesus had stopped the story there, it still would have been a great story. He would have answered His critics, “This is why I’m with the people far from God. They need the love and grace of God. I’m not trying to shame anybody. This is how much God loves everybody.” It’s the great American story of redemption.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out

His father went outside for a second time. Neither son is in the house. His father went out and this time, instead of forgiving him, he

pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours

Not this brother of mine, this son of *yours*,

who has squandered your property with prostitutes

This is the first time we hear about prostitutes. (The guy has a vivid imagination or he has been listening to the gossip columnists!) When he leaves the prostitutes and

comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

It’s a Hallmark moment, a story of lost and found, a story of a runaway child who’s been rescued. Along with the story of the Good Samaritan, this is probably the most famous story in the Bible. The Prodigal Son is sort of the earmark of what Christianity is supposed to be about. Because it’s so familiar, we can lose its reality. Last night after I preached, I was heading out the door, and a woman came up to me with tears in her eyes, and she said, “You were talking to me because my daughter has not. Pray for my Karen. She’s so far away and she won’t call.”

Then I go up to the office to get my coat and I’m just about to leave when one of you came in with a young woman and said, “Here, John, I’d like you to meet Alex” and then she left. I see that Alex is a little twitchy. We sit down and I get her some water and over the next 45 minutes, I hear the story of how she has been driving north on 100 with her boyfriend trying to get to the casino. They had been going the wrong direction and had gotten into such a furious fight about it, he pushed her out of the car in our parking lot. Alex is twitching because she is coming down off of a drug high. She said she was just days out of a three-week stint in Wisconsin. She said, “I know I’m not supposed to, I know I’m not, but nobody will help me. They just take and they use me.” She gave me the number of another man in Wisconsin whom she had left before. She said said, “Maybe he’ll take care of me now.” I wish I could say that it ended well, but it did not. With her permission, I called the police because to have her stay at one of your houses would, frankly, not have been helpful. She needed more. That’s what a prodigal really looks like. We don’t see them but we know they’re there. I think before we go further, I’d like to just stop and pray that God would bring a prodigal into your life.

Lord Jesus, this can just be another sermon, another *make me feel bad so I feel good* lecture, but these are real people, children of yours, whom sometimes we walk by. I ask You, Lord, You who loved the prodigals, You who love the older brothers, come to my life. Bring us together. Amen.

This is my favorite story in the Bible. I have reminders of it. One of our staff members, Jennifer Boardman, knows I love this story. Her parents went to Russia and while they were there, they went to the Hermitage, the famous Russian museum. They were there principally to see the one of the most famous paintings of Rembrandt. (*Slide shown.*) This is Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Because Jennifer knew I loved this, she asked her parents to buy a print, which they did and she gave it to me. A \$3 print that I put into a \$75 frame. I love it. It’s right over my desk so I see it every day.

Then this last summer Laura and I went to visit the kids in Washington, D.C. One of our friends in D.C. is a docent at the National Gallery. She says, “The average person looks at a picture like this for literally eight seconds. It’s been tested. People look and go, “Ohhhhh. What’s next?”

“Ohhhhhhh, I don’t like that. What’s next?” Eight seconds average, but this painting they stare at, sometimes for hours. This was made by Rembrandt in 1669. In exactly the same timeframe, 1668 to 1670, hundreds of miles away, a Spaniard, Bartolomé Murillo, was making another picture entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. (Slide shown.) When we were in D.C., we spent 45 minutes in front of this painting so she could teach us how to look at a painting. I fell in love with it. A 95-cent print, another \$75 frame, but I look at them every day to remind me of the story in the Gospel.

Because I have no eye for spatial stuff, I asked one of our interior decorators here if she would recast all the frames on my office wall, and when I came home from a trip, it was done. This is what they look like. (Slide shown.) She put the two prodigal son paintings right over my desk and in between them, she put a picture of my daughters. We hadn’t talked about this, but every parent, every grandparent, in many ways, every child, thinks about prodigals. Our children own our hearts. Ours are doing great, thanks for asking, but this is a reminder to me that we are all in this together.

How many of you, and I’m assuming it’s the vast majority, how many of you as you read the story would say, “I’ve grown up in the church, grown up in a pretty healthy home, grown up to have another, not perfect but pretty healthy home. I would probably be like the older brother.” Just raise your hand if you would say that. Okay, good. That’s probably 70 percent of us. How many of you would say that either you or somebody that you know, I’ll give you an out that way, you or somebody whom you know in your family was or is a prodigal, far from God, far from the church, and far from love? How many of you know prodigals? That’s who Jesus is talking about here when He tells the story we call *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. That’s the wrong title of the story. It really is. It should be *The Parable of the Missing Sons* because the surprise in this story is not the Hallmark moment of the father grabbing the younger brother. It is the father begging the older brother to come in, and he won’t. The missing son is not the younger son who returns. It’s the older son who stays outside. The missing son is the good kid.

If you would go back for a second to the Rembrandt painting. The older son is in the shadows back there. You see the two faces at the top. The other brother is in the shadows behind them, sulking, fuming, and the father has to go out looking for him, too. So the target of this story when Jesus tells the story is not the prodigals because they ain’t there, right? The story focuses on the religious folks. It says the religious folks looked askance at Jesus spending time with the sinners, and they started to grumble. The targets of this story are not the wayward sinners but the religious folks. They do everything the Bible requires, everything God wants, and that’s why, when they hear the end of the story, their hearts are not melted. They are furious because Jesus is basically saying, “The scumbags get in. *You* stay outside!” This is not a Hallmark moment for them. Jesus’ purpose was not to warm the heart but to shatter it.

Tim Keller wrote a great book called *The Prodigal God*. He says that every case when Jesus meets a religious person and an outcast at the same time, a sexual outcast (Luke 7) or a racial outcast (John 4) or a political outcast (Luke 19), or here in Luke 15, the outcast is the one who connects. The elder brother does not, so the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the Presbyterians enter the Kingdom before *you*. That would put *us* in the bad people seat because usually the Presbyterians would be on the outside with their arms folded like older brothers often have their arms folded. This story, basically, is the answer to the question in the book, “Why do people love Jesus but hate the church?” Because people believe that whatever the church does, Jesus loves the prodigals and somehow the church just seems filled with older brothers.

Another pastor said this, “If our preaching and our actions do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did.” I crossed that out in the book. I don’t like that sentence. But, if our churches aren’t appealing to younger brothers, they must be more filled with elder brothers than we’d like to think.

I’d like to believe that in this community, we are a little bit different. I think in this church, we do rejoice when prodigals come back. Many of you have incredibly soft, generous hearts. You reach out to the prodigals, and when your daughters or sons of whatever age come home, whether a wild story like drug addiction or something terrible happening in their lives or in a more normal course of events and say, “I was wrong,” we celebrate. We tell the story, we have a party, and then we bring them to church. Our temptation is to turn them into older brothers and older sisters who will feel good about their relationship with God because they know more, because they act better, because they are doing all the right things and all of a sudden, the younger brother becomes an older brother without becoming the father.

I’m saying this as one whose story is, I am a prodigal. I came back to Christ in a fairly, not dramatic but strong way. That was 30 years ago, 40 years ago, 42 years ago. I’ve had 42 years of being an older brother and have realized that—if, like an older brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey Him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper. He may be your example, even your inspiration, but He is not your Savior. You are serving as your own Savior, working your way in, working in the field, because it is just younger brothers who need a Savior.

Underneath the brothers’ different lives is the same motivation and aim. Both are using the father in different ways to get the things on which their hearts are really fixed. It was the wealth, not the love of the father that they believed would make them happy and fulfilled. At the end of the story, the elder brother has an opportunity to truly delight the father’s heart by coming in and hugging his brother, by going into the feast, but his resentful refusal shows that the father’s happiness had never been his goal. It was the farm. And now there is a third less of the farm because that stinking younger brother going to get another third of a diminished estate and, crudely put, that’s a lot of us.

In many ways, it’s not your fault. I think our hearts are set to see religion as being good people, God-fearing, obedient people. That’s sort of the default of religion. The first sign that you may have an older brother spirit is, when your life does not go as you want, you are not just sorrowful, you feel betrayed. “I’ve done all the right things.” Elder brothers, elder sisters believe that if they live a good life, they should get a good life, that God owes us a smooth road if we try hard to live up to standards. That’s religion. “I obey—therefore, I’m accepted by God. I obey—therefore, God loves me.” The basic operating principle of the Gospel is, “I am accepted by God. Jesus has come and found me—therefore, I’m changing the way that I live.” Not so that I’ll be okay but because I have been loved.

Martin Luther says that religion is the default setting of the human heart. You know, like when you have a computer and shut it off, when it reboots, it comes back to its normal setting. We come in and we hear that the Gospel is about grace and prodigals and rejoicing in heaven and not earning it and we go, “Yes, that’s what I want.” Then a week later, “Have I taken out the trash? Have I memorized that verse in the Bible? Have I given enough?” We’re back to religion. Luther said that even after you are converted by the Gospel, your heart will go back to operating on being-good principles unless you deliberately, repeatedly, set it to grace.

I was at a World Vision meeting in Canada. They had a speaker, Mark Buchanan, who spoke about a church he had visited in Toronto, the east side of Toronto, a rough neighborhood. It was a little start-up church, very much like The Table, very much like Upper Room. The reason it is like The Table is because every week, they have all kinds of strange visitors and every week, they serve Communion. At The Table, tonight, they will be serving Communion. At the end of the service, the pastor spoke about how the Lord's Supper is feasting on forgiveness and love with the promise of newness that only Jesus can offer. There for the first time was a streetwalker, and she was not sure how Communion happens. In that setting, they pass the plate of bread, and everybody takes one bread and waits for the pastor to pray. Then they all eat together. But when the plate comes to her, she takes a whole handful. She piles them on the lap of her very short skirt. Buchanan says he couldn't help but notice. He is a trained pastor, he notices these things. And when they were invited to eat, she ate every one of the breads, one at a time, and licked the crumbs off her fingers. Then the cup came around and the streetwalker did the same thing. She took six or seven of the little mini-cups, passed the tray along, and then one at a time, like shot glasses, she drank each cup, tipping it back to drain it. Buchanan said that the whole time, this young girl was weeping. She wasn't physically hungry or thirsty, she was starving to be loved. She is a prodigal who had wandered home and just like you and me, she wonders what will happen next. What will all these religious people do with me? Let's pray.

If You just had one story to tell about what the Kingdom is like, Jesus, I think You would tell this one. I want to thank You for being the kind of God who goes out into the fields after a prodigal like me after some of the disgusting and insensitive things that have marked my life. I thank You for bringing me and so many of my sisters and brothers home. I pray, Jesus, that You will never let me forget what it's like to come home. But now I'm an older brother, Jesus, a much older brother. I've been trying so hard to be good, and my friends here are trying so hard to be good. It's easy to get frustrated with people who come in and make it look so easy. I pray for my fellow older sisters and brothers here that You would break our hearts with the things that break Your heart, that You would help us see the prodigal next door, the prodigal in the work cubicle, the prodigal in our family, that You would teach us once more to reach out, not to tell them how they ought to live but that their father misses them. Lord Jesus, You keep telling this story because we keep getting religious. I pray right now for all those people we thought about, the prodigals far from You, and I ask You, Lord Jesus, to help us not stand in the doorway but run out after them like You. You are the God who will not stop until all the prodigals come home. I pray that You will open the eyes of our hearts that we might love You and love others like You do. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Lord. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.