

Lost in the Light

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[0 : 00] The first time I came to look at this passage to preach some years ago was the first time that I'd arrived at something I was about to preach on that I thought I knew really well already.

! I'd been raised a Christian, raised in Sunday school. I had this down, this parable. And if that's you, if you're familiar with this passage as well, then do watch out because if you're anything like me, then I can safely predict that there'll be bits of truth.

Bits of this story that you didn't know were there, and perhaps, like me, bits of this story that I thought were there, that either myself or a Sunday school teacher or somewhere along the line, it had just been made up and just popped into my head.

And I thought it was in the passage, but it's not there. It's unsettling when things like that happen, isn't it? Like, when's the first time you realize that there's nothing in the nursery room that suggests, even remotely, that Humpty Dumpty's an egg?

It's unsettling, isn't it? So let's keep our eyes on the passage as we go, because I want to suggest that the details of the passage are quite deliberate. So whether you know it or not, let's pay close attention.

[1 : 11] If you do take notes, the structure is fairly simple. It should appear on the screen. We've got Lost in the Dark and Lost in the Light, and mercifully all under the title Lost and Found.

So what I'm going to do, before we slowly go through Jesus' story here, is just take a look at the scene which Luke sets for us.

Who's all there? Before this parable is told, who's gathered around? We've got two main groups. We've got tax collectors and sinners on the one hand, and the Pharisees and teachers on the other. And the latter group are seriously unhappy that Jesus is eating with the former. And let's get this in perspective. When you hear tax collector, I might have said this before, but don't think HMRC.

The tax collectors here are Jews who worked for the Romans, and it's not just that they sometimes had their hands in the cookie jar, like with little Zacchaeus. No, these guys raised taxes for a particular reason, so that Rome could afford to employ a standing army there in Jerusalem.

[2 : 22] This is standard practice in the Roman Empire. The occupied people pay taxes, which keeps an army over them. So tax collectors are the biggest turncoat cowardly bunch you ever saw.

These are the Nazi collaborators of 20th century France. They're bad people. And the other group are so bad, they're just called sinners.

This isn't Paul writing Romans. This isn't a we're all sinners. This is Luke saying the easiest way for me to collectively describe these people is just to say sinners.

That's how bad they were. They were almost certainly morally worse than you. Tax collectors and sinners are capital V, capital B, capital P, very bad people.

And Jesus is eating with them. The worst people in society. Whatever that is for you. Not the lowliest, not the dirtiest, but the worst, the most sinful.

[3 : 24] Jesus is eating and drinking with them. And not just like he's sat down in Machedese with a Bible or a copy of Two Ways to Live or something. Jesus is often teaching these people, but equally often he's just eating with them, breaking bread.

And so no wonder the Pharisees are scandalized. We should get them in perspective as well.

They've devoted their lives to the scriptures. Undeterred by Roman rule, they've kept Judaism up and running.

These guys had to memorize huge chunks of the Old Testament, of the Torah, in order to qualify. These guys were serious. You know, the reason that you abandon your Bible reading plans in February, when you get to Leviticus or somewhere around there.

They've got those books, those first five books of the Bible rattling around in their heads. Memorized. Leviticus, Numbers. They're likely much better Jews than we are Christians. The real deal.

Well, it's to this second group that Jesus is particularly talking in our passage today. Look down at verses 2 and 3. Pharisees and teachers grumbling about Jesus eating with sinners.

[4 : 37] So he told them this parable in the presence of the tax collectors and sinners. We'll circle back to the sheep and the coins as we go, but we're just going to jump in and retell the lost son's story, looking at the details and remembering that it's being told primarily to the Pharisees who are complaining.

There was a man who had two sons. And actually, let's just put the brakes on right away. Because we've got all these people with the first few books of the Bible rattling around in their heads.

And Jesus is telling a story of a man with two sons. Well, what are they like? Well, the older one's hardworking, a real field hand, hard worker, close to the father. However, the young one, not so much, wayward and grabbing.

Well, even if it doesn't occur to us instinctively, the Pharisees will surely be thinking of Isaac and his two sons, Jacob and Esau. The older one, a hard worker, the dad's favorite, expected to get various blessings.

But the young one tricks the dad into giving the blessings to him and ends up running away from home. Or perhaps, I don't know if we've got any in-house Pharisees who have the New Testament memorized.

[5 : 55] But this might remind us of another story in Matthew that Jesus tells. It's such a similar story. In fact, I describe it just as a different version of the same story.

This is Matthew 21. I'll read it for you. There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, Son, go and work today in the vineyard.

I will not, he answered. But later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, I will, sir. But he did not go.

Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first, they answered. Jesus said to them, truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

So what seems to be the case is that based on the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau, Jewish rabbis would tell stories that started with there was a man with two sons.

[6 : 57] In order to make a point based around the general idea that it doesn't matter where you start, it matters where you finish. Close to the father, willing to work, far from him and lazy, then switching.

So that's the type of story that Jesus is indicating he's about to tell. Okay, so that's line one done. Lost in the dark. The younger son says, at the beginning of the story, Father, give me my share of the estate.

Brackets, that's coming to me when you die. That's not mince words here. This is vile behavior. He wishes that his father were dead. He's not ashamed to say so to his face and demand money from him. This is awful. It's just disgusting behavior. And who do you think Luke expects us to be connecting him to?

Well, Jesus is speaking in front of this crowd. Who's Jesus expecting the listeners to be connecting this son to? Probably the tax collectors and sinners.

[8 : 02] So the youngest son wants the money and the father divides it. Again, it's a pretty efficient storytelling. No mention of hurt or argument. The long and short of it is the father divides his estate.

And again, just to press the point, this is one of the reasons we can be sure that the details matter in this story. Because where they don't, Jesus just doesn't give them. The son leaves.

No great surprise. After the I wish you were dead, give me money conversation. Things were a little awkward at home. So he goes to a far off country and begins to live recklessly and squanders the money.

We're not told how he does it. We don't get details. It's not going to stop the older brother having a guess later on. But we don't know. But then hard times hit and he has nothing to fall back on.

So he hires himself out. Your Bible might have a note saying something like joined himself.

Essentially what it means is he's attached himself to a family and is working for them in the hopes of getting something.

[9 : 10] But actually we see no one gives him anything. He's not technically hired. He's doing the lowliest possible job for a Jew and getting nothing for it.

I always thought, by the way, that the son ate the pig food. He didn't. He wishes he could. He's just stood there envying pigs but getting nothing.

And it's here as this young Jewish man stands looking after pigs that he's insanely jealous of that he comes to his senses.

He's joined himself as a servant to this foreign family. But he thinks if he were one of his father's servants, he'd have a full stomach. Possibly something to put away for later.

If he's going to be joined to a family as a servant, he might as well be joined to his own. So he heads home and starts working on his apology. Not the best apology, by the way.

[10 : 11] The Pharisees, again, may have spotted it. He's probably just half remembering it from his synagogue lessons. I've sinned against heaven and against you. The sentiment is correct. But it is the words of Pharaoh's apology to Moses.

That's the only place this apology comes in the Old Testament. Right before he changes his mind and tries to wipe out all the Israelites. So not the greatest of apologies. But the father sees him from a long way off.

And he runs towards him. Flings himself down at the son's feet. And doesn't even give him time to get out. His apology.

The father doesn't acknowledge the, I don't deserve to be in your family. He just says, someone get my boy some jewelry and some steak and some shoes. How do children always lose their shoes? It doesn't matter. Music, dancing. Let's celebrate. And so what's that chunk of the story there for?

[11 : 15] What's it telling us? Well, it reinforces for us the truth that some of us might never have heard. And for others, it might have just slipped into cliché. That the gospel really is for everyone.

That there's no type of sinner who's disqualified from the kingdom. That the Lord hitches up his robes and runs towards the most vile of sinners when they repent. And speak of repentance, this isn't a very tidy repentance.

He's not got a great idea of what it looks like to come home, does he? He's not even sure how he'll be received. He's offering himself as a servant. The words he has are no good really.

But he turns and he comes home. It's the turning. That's it. Not the quality of the words. Not the quality of his understanding.

This is what repentance means. He turns. And that makes the difference. And when we do that, when we turn towards the Father, no matter what then lies behind us, the Father sees us coming and runs out to greet us.

[12 : 22] And maybe there are some people here who need to hear that. Who think they're too far gone. That they're not lovable by God.

Or by definition, you're not unlovable because look how loved you are. So loved that God came from heaven to rescue you. So loved that Jesus died so that you could blamelessly walk through judgment and be with him forever.

And yet, while all of that is true and glorious, and while some of you may want to just sit and let the bliss of that truth wash over you and just zone out for the rest of the sermon, this parable was not told primarily to the tax collectors and sinners who are there.

It was to the Pharisees and the teachers. So now we look at what it looks like to be lost in the light. We've got these two types of people here.

But both groups are lost. There are those who are lost away from home, like the sheep and the younger son. And there are those who are lost at home, like the coin and the older brother.

[13 : 40] And I suppose all of us will instinctively, naturally incline towards one or other of those two character types. And over the years, you'll see examples of how these older brother, younger brother instincts play out even in Christian circles.

For example, when a public pastor figure falls from grace, how do you find yourself instinctively reacting?

What's the worst element of your reaction? Is it just the sneering enjoyment of an older sibling? Just liking seeing someone else getting told off, seeing someone else fail?

Having a chance to discredit someone you never really liked in the first place? Or is it more like the younger brother attitude? He says, wow, great, this is a perfect chance because that pastor used to preach against this type of sexual sin, perhaps, this kind of pride.

And now I can chuck all of that instruction out with him. Well, there are two ways to be lost, aren't there? Lost in the dark, lost in the light, away from home and at home.

[14:47] So let's look back a little earlier at the passage together. We've got this lost sheep, one in a hundred, just like all the others. And it's not that this sheep matters more than the others.

But the lost sheep takes on a disproportionate value because it's lost, away from home, like this younger son. And sometimes, by the way, people think of this as really unfair on the 99.

You just get abandoned. You get left alone. But for me, if you're in the 99 and you've got your shepherd who's looking after you, you feel safe.

What's the only way you could be made to feel safer? Well, surely it's by seeing evidence that if you were to wander, he would go out and find you.

Witnessing that if you ever left that place of safety, you would be sought, you would be brought back. So there's the sheep lost away from home. Then there's the coin, like the older brother, lost at home. Same deal. The woman lights a lamp and gets searching.

[15:54] She must find it. Well, let's go back now to the lost son story because it's not finished. It's not done. The older son is in the field at this stage.

And this is where you really get a sense of the scale of the party, the scale of the celebration.

Because it's one thing to hear music. I confess I've been the subject of some noise complaints in my time.

But never in my wildest days of youth did anyone ever complain about how loud I was dancing. But here the son comes to the house. He hears the music. He hears the dancing.

And he doesn't know what on earth is going on. So he asks his servant. And the language here is important. The servant says, your brother, your brother has come home.

The fattened calf's been killed, et cetera, et cetera. But the older brother won't go in. And there's something remarkably petty about that.

[16:59] The older brother's denying no one but himself. I was at a birthday party with my son recently for one of his friends at school. And I'll tell you what it didn't look like. It wasn't just the birthday boy just sat there eating cake, dancing and playing while all the others stood around and watched.

Because that's not how parties work. If the older brother were to go in, there'd be steak and dancing and enjoyment for him as well. He's only denying himself. But he wants nothing to do with it.

And it's not just that he doesn't want anything to do with the party, with the celebration. It's that he doesn't want anything to do with his brother. Let's examine the older son's words.

We're going to focus on the first three phrases that he uses, which give away a huge amount. How does he see his brother? How does he see his father? Well, firstly, look at verse 29.

He says, all these years I've been slaving. All these years I've been slaving. He sees himself not as a son here, does he?

[18:13] He's not been serving the father out of love for all these years. He resents the father. He sees him primarily as just a rule giver. Is that how you see God? It's just a big spoil sport in the sky?

Let me rephrase. When you obey God, do you do it out of love for him? Or just because he's big and it seems like a sensible idea?

Or perhaps beyond that, do you, as well as understanding that God is big and in charge, do you believe that his instructions are kind and good?

I mentioned briefly earlier Christian teaching on sex, designed only to be between one man and one woman in the context of marriage. And you might be excellent at keeping that.

You might be the best at keeping that. But if you think that by keeping that, you are somehow missing out, that you're the loser in that transaction, then you need to be careful.

[19:20] Sacrifice is good, but the Lord doesn't ask for meaningless sacrifices. His commands are good, and they are good for you.

Does the elder son have a heart that loves what the father loves? Or does he love wicked things, but reluctantly slaves away, dutifully waiting for his inheritance that way?

I mean, the older brother talks about the younger wasting the father's estate on prostitutes. Well, how does he know that? No, honestly, how does he know that? We don't know that.

He went to a far-off land, is what we're told, and wasted it. Pete Williams in Cambridge facetiously makes the point, it's not as if he's sending postcards or Snapchats from the brothel, is it?

The older brother is just imagining what he would do if he were let loose. Well, if I went crazy, I'd use my fortune to have as much sex as I possibly could.

[20 : 20] It's just prurience. He's living vicariously in his imagination, in his judgment of his brother, and he thinks he's missing out. So my first question for those of you who are living lives now of obedience to God, if you're making notes, write it down to think on later.

Do you resent your obedience? In which area of your life do you resent your obedience to God? Is it in giving out of your hard-earned wages? Is it in holding back on your sexual appetites? Is it that you spent the past 20, 30, 40, 50 years living as a Christian?

And then you see people living lives of really fun, beautiful debauchery, and then they become a Christian, and they only have to live God's way for whatever time's left on the clock.

Augustine, in his youth, famously said, Lord, make me chaste, but not yet. Because he wanted to enjoy his sin a little longer. Well, be careful.

[21 : 29] If that's your perspective, then you are not loving what the Father loves. Those things are not beautiful. The Father says to you, all that I have is yours for the taking.

I am always near to you, but that's not how you see things. And that leads us to the next giveaway phrase. It looks a little innocuous. It says, second half of verse 29, you never even gave me a young goat.

But hold on a second. Do we think that this farm boy in first century Mediterranean has been a vegetarian for all the years that he's worked there?

I don't think so. Not really within that culture. So why does he see things this way? Why does he say, you've never given me a young goat? Well, what he means is, you've never given me something to celebrate with.

He says, in fact, amongst all the celebration that does happen in this chapter, he says, I just wanted to make merry with my friends.

[22 : 34] You never gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends. It's that he doesn't want to be feasting with his brother. He doesn't want to be feasting with his father. Dad's not on the guest list. That's why he hasn't enjoyed the meat that he's eaten surely over the years, because it's been with his dad, and it just doesn't give him joy.

Because he's seen, as we've seen, sorry, he sees his father as an overbearing rule giver. And this brings us to that final brutal phrase.

The servant comes out and tells the older son, your brother has returned. The father comes out of the party. Don't miss that. The father leaves the party for this son as well.

And the father says, your brother, your brother was lost. And what does the older son say? He doesn't say, this brother of mine. He says, this son of yours.

I've often wondered how Eve must have felt when Adam uses the phrase to God, this woman you put here with me, as his way of shedding blame. And some of that hurt is surely felt by the father here.

[23 : 47] This son of yours. The older brother disassociates from the family. He doesn't want to be a part of it. So here's another hard question for you.

Is there any believer whom you refuse to call your sister? Or whom you won't see as your brother? Then you are ripping yourself out of the family.

You're not affecting them. They're eating steak and dancing in the party. You are heaping all manner of unnecessary judgment upon yourself because you will not delight in the fact that your brother, your sister, that terrible person has been made a new creation in Christ.

Here's the difference, ultimately, between these two brothers. The younger brother knew he was a son and deserved to be a slave. The older brother thought he was a slave and felt like he deserved much better.

You see, the younger brother, he still calls his father, father, even when he's offering himself up as a servant. And there's a particular aspect of this story which is especially galling for any older brother types and surely especially for the Pharisees.

[25 : 05] Back in the story of Jacob and Esau, when Jacob runs away, he does eventually return this time, the opposite of this story, having accumulated a vast amount of wealth.

And as he comes near to Esau, his older brother, he sends an apologetic bribe ahead of him, again, an insulting and poor apology. And he himself walks at the head of his huge household column with his head bowed, ready to refer to himself as Esau's servant.

But Esau picks up his robes, runs, embraces and kisses him. That's the original older brother. Now Esau, whom the Bible says God hated, even Esau recognized the rightness, the joy of taking joy in a contrite heart and a returning brother.

Those who don't have less grace than Esau, whom God hated. There was a man who had two sons. Jesus is really laying it on thick on the Pharisees here, and rightly so.

[26 : 15] This dismissal of tax collectors and of sinners is anti-gospel behavior. It is deeply wicked. But let us be careful too. Because if for them, then the tax collectors were the cartoon baddies, who are the cartoon bad guys for us in church?

It's the Pharisees, isn't it? How do you feel about the fact that if you flicked back a page at the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus is sitting and eating with them as well? Do you hate those hypocrites?

Is that hypocritical? Do you hate yourself for that? Well, hold on, because the story's not yet finished. Don't look down. Jesus doesn't finish it.

It's not finished. We don't hear how the older son responds. It's left up in the air. And that's not how conversations end, is it? Something would have happened next. People don't just monologue and then it fades to black.

And this is where we have to be careful. Because where there's an unfinished story, we instinctively have to finish it. Some of us, even today, probably didn't get out the car until we finished the song playing on the radio.

[27 : 29] We often instinctively draw conclusions into our heads. And I think for this story, it's normally this. We draw it to a close in our memories that the older son was sullen and silent and still refused to go in.

But the father entreats the older son to come into the party. We don't hear the reply because who's Jesus talking to? The Pharisees, the older brothers.

And he's inviting them to give the answer themselves. He's saying, how about you? Will you come in? And so we don't know where this story ends, but what do we know?

What has been told in this passage? You can look down now. We've got the sheep lost away from home and a son lost away from home. And when they're found, there is a big party. But what happens if the elder brother is found?

Well, we do know what happens when things lost at home are found. Verses 9 and 10, when she finds the coin, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice with me, I've found my coin.

[28 : 38] In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. And that's about those who are lost at home.

There's the same joy. Rejoice with me, I've found what was lost. When a stiff-collared hypocrite repents, Jesus says in verse 10, there is the same joy before the angels of God.

And can you picture it? All the angels dancing in front of God? Well, if so, then you've not quite read properly because there's joy in the presence of the angels of God.

Well, who's in the presence of the angels of God? The clue's in the name. It's God. God is partying before his angels over the repentance of a judgmental Pharisee over an older son.

The father doesn't just hitch up his robes for the younger sons. And people sometimes perhaps express concern over this kind of language, the hitching up of robes, the running, the partying.

[29 : 40] It can be a struggle, particularly for those of us who are instinctively older sons, with the idea of God giving up his dignity for us like that. But you think the human body is all that for the almighty God to step into?

There's a big surprise waiting for you at Christmas when you hear what God did. Or the crucifixion, the tool designed to humiliate those who are already the lowest in society.

No, Christ has hitched up his robes and run towards sinners. And when they turn to him, the father hitches up his robes again to dance and celebrate. What is sobering, though, is that for the most part, the Pharisees that Jesus speaks to here did not come into the party.

They crucified Jesus. Some came, but it was clearly harder for them. So here's what Jesus says to those of you who are older brothers, those of you who might feel lost at home.

Everything I have is yours. You're always with me, but you have to come in. Let's go back one more time to the beginning.

[30 : 56] What is it that sets Jesus off on this storytelling series of these three stories? Well, he's accused by the Pharisees in verse 2. This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

His answer? Too right I do. Praise God, he still does. He will do so in a few minutes as we take the Lord's Supper together and will indeed feast with us even unto eternity.

So, are you a sinner who longs to come home? Then, come home. Eat, feast, drink. We are all naturally with our backs to this party, but we all have an invitation that stands now and up to the day when we'll be gathered together in full fellowship, making a tumultuous noise of perfect song as we feast.

Well, as that settles, let's pray together before the musicians come up. that settler who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so who seems so