

Series: We'll Leave The Light On For You
Luke 15

April 11, 2010

“We'll Leave The Light On For You—Part One”

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When I was in high school...and I won't frighten you with the year on that because a couple of months ago, two of my 20-something-year-old kids asked me what year it was when I graduated. They both gasped loudly and their hands flew to their mouths and then they laughed until they cried. So I will spare you those details. But when I was a sophomore in high school, my mother drove me to school. Junior and senior year, I drove with my friends.

And about four or five blocks away from our campus was a house with a large picture window in the front, which isn't unusual. And at Christmas that year, my sophomore year, they put a beautiful Christmas tree up in the window with the lights on. Nothing out of the ordinary until December came and went and January, February, and March, the tree didn't go down. Now in Whittier, it was the kind of neighborhood where sometimes people would leave their lights up most of the year, but this was a little unusual.

And by May and June, it sort of became the talk of the neighborhood, until one day we opened the *Whittier News* and read the story of the parents who lived there who had a son in Vietnam. And they had decided that until their boy came home, one way or another, that tree was going to stay up. And for three years, that tree was in that front room, lit up 24 hours a day.

When there is that much love in a relationship, leaving the light on is a no-brainer. And the metaphor of leaving a light on really is at the heart of the gospel. From the beginning of Scripture in the Garden when sin entered the world, God immediately said, "I have a plan. There will come a Person in the future who will be able to overcome this for you," and He turned the light on.

And in Isaiah, the prophet wrote that the people had stumbled around in a great darkness for so long and there was coming a light. And Jesus said, "***I AM the light of the world,***" and My light is on for all of us."

What we're going to look at this morning and over the next two weeks, broken up by Compassion weekend, is Luke 15, this parable of the prodigal son. Now I need a little sympathy this morning because the assignment that was given out is that I get the younger son this week and then next week, John gets the older son and then the father. So I have to leave this story kind of hanging, and I'm not able to tie all the loose ends in at the end. But if I overstep my bounds, he's not here, so next week, just pretend like you haven't heard any of this, okay?

But this story in particular is one of the ways in which Jesus really punches home the incredible radical nature of the gospel. One of my favorite authors, Annie Dillard, writes this great paragraph about what we ought to assume is going to happen when we walk in the doors of our churches. And she says, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke or as I suspect, does no one really believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet gloves to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should be issuing life preservers and signal flares." And by the way,

ushers, I would pay money if next week, you were doing that. "They should lash us to our pews for the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return."

We vastly underestimate the radical nature of the gospel. And I thought when they took the pews out to refurbish them, I was a little disappointed when they came back without seatbelts on them. We should know when we come in this door that we are hearing this story weekly of a kind of new faith that took the breath away, even of the Romans at the time of Christ.

Not long after Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, His followers, when they started this new movement, embraced the kind of faith that was so different from religion as the world had known it up until then that the Romans actually had a name for the early Christians. Do you know what they called them? They called them *atheists*, because there was no paradigm in which religion would fall that somebody didn't have to obey the rules in order to be accepted by the gods.

And all of a sudden, Jesus turned everything upside down and said, "You are accepted by God through the work of Christ on the cross." Therefore our obedience flows out of that. In 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul sums it all up by saying what's true about this new kind of faith is that it's God doing the work reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our sins against us.

And this radical nature of the gospel is going to get unfolded in three different stories Jesus tells in Luke 15. We're going to look real briefly at the first two and then really focus on one of the characters in the third story of the prodigal son. But in order to do that, we need to unpack the first couple of verses and really understand the context of the story Jesus is telling because it means everything. It shapes the meaning of the stories.

How many of you in this room have ever had the inconvenience and the frustration of a flat tire? Raise your hand. Yeah, pretty much everyone. So in a circumstance like that, it would be perfectly understandable either to think or to say out loud this sentence... "I'm mad about my flat."

Now the first year John and I were married, we lived in Aberdeen, Scotland, where if you said this sentence, you would mean something entirely different. You would actually mean you're quite excited about the place in which you live. Completely different meanings.

So rather than jump into the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, we have to take a look at the first two verses, and understand what was going on that caused Jesus to do something very unusual that He didn't do very often... speak this long in a sequence of building three stories. So in verses 1 and 2, Luke says, here's what was going on. ***"The tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around [Jesus] to hear Him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law [the religious leaders] muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them.'"***

And this is the setting in which the people who were far away from God in the eyes of almost everyone found a gravitational pull to this man, Jesus, so they were sitting around Him, listening to the words of hope that came out of His mouth. And then Luke tells us the Pharisees' and the teachers of the law's response was to *murmur*, a word only used twice in the New Testament, that really talks about *an undercurrent of discontented complaint* that doesn't have the courage to directly speak to the person with whom they are frustrated, but talks among themselves in a way that incites rioting.

And their complaint was if Jesus really was the Son of God, He would know what kind of people were around Him and He wouldn't touch them with a 10-foot pole. And not only is He touching them; He is welcoming them and eating with them. And again, Luke chooses a word that's very unusual when he says *receiving* or *welcoming*. He doesn't use the typical Greek word for *welcome*. He adds a prefix to it, which really means what Jesus was doing was not only welcoming them into fellowship, He was inviting them to sit down and take a seat with Him. He was accepting them as friends. He was eating a meal, which in that culture was sharing with somebody at the deepest level.

Basically Jesus was building a religious community, a faith-based community, where those on the outside were on the inside. And it was making the Pharisees furious because what had effectively happened with them is their rules had built a wall up between them and the very people to whom they were supposed to offer faith. And Jesus was busy breaking these walls down, and that is the context in which Jesus takes the opportunity to tell a couple of stories.

And we're going to look real briefly at the lost sheep and the lost coin. Jesus uses these two images side by side, and the similarity in these two stories is that the sheep and the coin were both incredibly valuable to the person who had lost them. There was great value in these items that were lost. Secondly in the story, Jesus tells that there was a great price to be paid by the person who rescued these lost items. And then third, there was an unspeakable joy experienced by the person who rescued and found what was lost. And so Jesus starts off by talking about something everybody who was listening would understand, Pharisees and ordinary Jewish people alike.

There was a group of sheep, about 100, and there was a shepherd. And what most of them would have known that is very true...not one-hundred percent of the time, but a lot of the time...is sheep are basically pretty stupid animals. They need to be rescued constantly. They're the kind of animal that when they see where green grass is, they don't think, *Is the place so precarious that once I've gotten myself up there and I've eaten all the grass, I might have to fall to my death to get down because there is no good way down?*

And if you were a shepherd in that day, a common experience would be finding the bodies of dead sheep that had done that. And when you find a sheep that is missing, unlike a dog when you roll up a piece of bologna...because that's how we get our dog back when he runs away...the sheep don't come to you. They run away from you. In fact, a good shepherd knew if he was going looking for a lost sheep, when and if he found that sheep, he would have to jump on it, seize it, tie its little legs up and sling it over his shoulders.

When you see these beautiful pictures of Jesus as the Good Shepherd with this gentle little lamb around His shoulders, this is not a pretty scene. This is a smart shepherd with a stupid sheep, knowing this is the only way to get the sheep back. All sheep need to be thoroughly rescued and the sheep can contribute nothing to its own salvation.

And so Jesus tells that story to dig up the ground and the soil in the hearts of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And I don't know that they were getting it yet. And then at the end of this passage, Jesus uses the word *joy* three times, not only to describe how the shepherd felt, but how he invited the whole community to join him in the celebration that he found the sheep and then how heaven feels when that which is lost is found.

And then without taking a breath, Jesus turns His attention to the story of a woman who had 10 coins. Everybody would have understood that most likely that meant that was her life savings for the rest of her

life and she lost one of those coins. And here's an interesting little side note, too, where Jesus plays a character in each of these three stories. He is the shepherd. He is, in this story, the woman, which...you talk about a radical viewpoint...would have been unheard of in that day.

And when this woman realizes one of her 10 coins is missing, she is so frantic about it that Jesus says she lights her lamp in the middle of the day, using precious oil that costs money, and frantically sweeps her house and searches carefully until she finds the coin. Again, twice, He uses the word *joy* to describe what she experiences and what she invites her neighbors to come over and celebrate with her.

And so Jesus has set the groundwork, and now in verse 11, He turns His attention to a final story, but with verse 11, He puts the clutch in and He shifts to a higher gear and all bets are off. He ratchets up the stakes in this story. He starts with verse 11 saying, "***There was a man who had two sons.***" Now automatically, all of the listeners would have realized what was happening, that the sheep was one thing and the coin was quite something else, but now, it was a son at stake.

We have termed this particular story *The Story of the Prodigal Son*, but that's not in Scripture. From the very beginning of this story, all three characters are evident...two sons and a father. And we're going to look this morning at the younger son, but this story is not just about the younger son. The characters present from the beginning of the story are two boys, both of whom rebelled, one of them by being very bad and one of them by being very good.

One of them went far away from the father on a journey of self-discovery, looking for personal happiness in the form of freedom and pursuit of his own goals. The other boy went far away from his father with a kind of rigid moral conformity and a following of the rules he thought would make him good enough to get God's attention.

So in verse 12, Jesus begins the story by telling them what the younger son did. He went to his father, and he said to his father, "***Give me my share of the estate.***" Let's hold that verse right there for a minute. Much like in the story of the good Samaritan...where when Jesus went through the priest's response to the man wounded on the road and the Levite's response to the man wounded on the road, and then moves to the third character whom everybody would have expected to be just an ordinary Jew, and Jesus said actually it was a Samaritan who came by...when most likely you could have heard the crackle through the crowds at the audacity of that statement, the same thing is happening right here. To this audience listening, it would be utterly unthinkable that a son, while his father was still alive, would come and ask for his share of the estate.

The other thing that is interesting in the way Luke tells this story is rather than use the very simple Greek word for *inheritance*, he uses a clumsy phrasing, where the son actually says, "I would like my share of the estate." Because inherent in the word *inheritance* is the leadership responsibility that would involve overseeing the father's estate along with that inheritance, and that's not what this son wanted. This son didn't want any of the responsibilities. He didn't want to be part of his father's world. He wanted his share of his father's estate and then he wanted to get as far away from his father as possible. He just wanted the good stuff and then he wanted distance.

And so he asked for his share of the estate, which would have been about a third of what the father owned. The older son would have gotten two-thirds. And again to everyone listening, not only was this unheard of, this would have been perceived as the most hurtful event that could have possibly happened in the life of a father. It would have been offensive, humiliating, disrespectful to the point of being like mutiny. And

in a radical contradiction to the most venerable traditions of that time, would have shown a deep disrespect to the point that it was tantamount to him saying, "I wish my father were dead."

He doesn't just break the law. He breaks the relationship with his father. It would be a little bit like a husband coming home and saying, "We have had 27 great years of marriage, and we're probably going to have another 10. But in anticipation of you dying, I have selected my second wife and invited her to move into the guest house. You don't mind, do you?" Now you think that's a ludicrous story. I actually have an uncle who did that, but we're not going to get into my dysfunctional family. I really did.

And then in the rest of this verse, as Jesus is leaving them with their mouths gaping at the audacity of this son and the humiliation of the father, what follows in verse 12 that is even more amazing is the father's response. It says the father said "Yes" to the son and divided his property among the boys. Now in order to do it quickly, this would have taken a radical selling of property and animals. He didn't have liquid assets in the bank. He would have had to sell immediately, probably at a much lower price than he could normally get, in a hurry to give his son what he wanted. His father said, "Yes."

Ken Bailey in his amazing work on this parable says if you go to any Middle Eastern village right now and ask any of the villagers what the father's response would be to this request, to a person, they would say, "Anger to the degree that there would probably be physical and verbal blows assaulted on the son and strong 'No' and a disinheriting of that boy."

Two verses into this story and we are already seeing what Jesus is unpacking is the radical nature of the gospel...so radical the Romans called them *atheists*, so radical the religious people of the day who thought they were on the inside completely missed the grace Jesus brought.

And so in verses 13 through 16, Luke begins to unpack what happened to this son. It says that he ***"set off for a distant country."*** And he didn't go far away for a travel experience. He went to get far away from his father. And unlike the sheep and the coin, this character initiates the being lost. It says that he ***"set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."*** Let's pause there for just a minute.

It doesn't really tell us what he did. Now farther on in the story, which I'm not allowed to go into right now, the older son gives his commentary on what he thinks the younger son did with the money, but we don't have any evidence of it. All we know is that for a time, this younger son took a third of his father's estate and in a very short order, spent all of it on what Luke calls *wild living*, on the pursuit of pleasure and momentary satisfaction, on immediate gratification, on bursts of pleasure, substituting the passing for what is permanent. He was on a quest for personal fulfillment and self-actualization, living in the illusion of freedom, not asking where this road went. And he spent all of the money.

And then what can often happen in circumstances like that is something invokes pain in a person. And Luke tells us when he had come to the end of his resources, what happened to the land he lived in was that ***"there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need."*** Pain is an amazing professor in our lives and our wrongdoing can set up a strain in the fabric of reality only pain can open for us. Sometimes pain in our lives is the gift that shakes us out of denial into facing the sins we are mired in.

And it's interesting that those of us who are parents are so quick to move into our children's lives and cut pain off from them, when what's really true is often, pain is where we find God. We see the most harmful sins that we can't really see.

Having come to the end of his resources and run out of money and then hit the famine, it said this boy realized he was in need and went to be hired by a citizen of that country, who was probably a Gentile, and he was given the job of feeding the pigs. Now again, the readers of this story would have understood something even deeper going on, that this young boy when he left, in all the horrific things he did to his father, had so broken the relationship.

But he had also broken the relationship with the village he lived in, because if a Jewish boy left home and wasted his money and was in the job of a Gentile worker, they had a particular tradition they would do. When this boy would come to the village, the whole village would meet him at the boundaries of the village and break a pot in front of him and tell him that no longer was he welcome either to his father's home or in the village. So those who are listening to the story get the incredible distance this young boy was from his father, just like all these people who were sitting around Jesus, at whom the Pharisees were appalled, were near Him.

And Jesus says the boy was sitting feeding the pigs, and he began to longingly look at the pods they were feeding the pigs and wished he could even eat those, **"but no one gave him anything."** In unpacking some of the work Nouwen and Keller have done on this passage, these pods were carob pods, something only the very poor ate or was fed to the pigs.

In my home, growing up in Whittier, California, we had one large tree in our back yard and it was a carob tree. It had these beautiful green leaves and then these long, dark brown, thin, flat pods that grew and when you broke them open, it looked like little cocoa beans. And as children, we would get so excited and we would grind them up. And we did and then, the first time we tasted them, we knew...*Not chocolate*. Incredibly bitter, awful. We took to just throwing them at each other instead of grinding them up to eat them. There is something lacking in a human stomach that won't allow us to digest this food.

And Jesus was saying this boy had not only humiliated his father, he had gone to work for a Gentile and had to feed the pigs, which was an unclean occupation for a Jewish boy. And he longs to eat even the food that is barely good enough for the pigs. That's how desperate his life had become.

And then in verse 17, in a bit of a turning point for this particular character, Jesus said at that point in his life, the young boy **"came to his senses."** Now what we're about to see is that while he came to his senses, he still was in a place where he felt more remorse than brokenness. There was still more going on in the way of hunger and embarrassment than there was in the ability to accept an unmerited gift of restoration from his father. I'm not even sure he knew that would be awaiting him.

And we know he was still in the remorseful place and not the broken place because when he came to his senses, he began to hatch a plan. He began to rehearse in his mind the speech he would give to his father when he realized, *Even the hired men who work on my father's estate have food to eat. This is how bad it's gotten for me. So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to go back to my father...in verses 18 to 20...and I'm going to say this speech...*

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." He gets that really right...the vertical sin with God, the horizontal sin with other people. And **"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."** *"So what about this plan? What about if you take me on as one of your hired men so I can earn my money back to pay you back and then earn enough money to live on?" And that speech is what I'll take to my father.*

Now to people listening to the story, that probably didn't sound like half a bad plan. *I'm going to go and grovel at the feet of the father I have offended. I'm going to beg for his forgiveness. I'm going to beg for God's forgiveness and then I'm just going to ask to be treated like a servant.* He's still thinking of love as a condition and he's not yet seeing himself as a son who is loved without having to earn anything. And he goes back to his father with a plan of his own.

Now I can't tell you what happens when he goes back to his father, but I can tell you this. Somewhere between his rehearsed speech and what happens when he meets his father, he drops the last half of his rehearsed speech and he says to his father, ***"I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."*** He completely leaves out the part...***"Make me like one of your hired men."*** *Make me like somebody who has to follow enough rules in order to earn favor back.* That part of the rehearsed speech never leaves his lips because of something that happens when he sees his father.

Now I know most of you know the story, but I'm going to ask you to suspend judgment for the next couple of weeks to come back and find out what happens because what Jesus really was saying in this parable is "You think the older son who follows the rules is the good guy. He may be the most lost of the two boys. This boy whom you're listening to who is so far away from God somehow is restored very quickly to the Father."

Henri Nouwen writes that one of our greatest challenges as Christ-followers is to be able to receive God's forgiveness. A total willingness to let God be God and for Him to do the healing, the restoring and the renewing and to let our obedience and our following whatever rules we follow to be a response to that kind of love, not an attempt to earn that kind of love. And there is an enormous difference between religion and faith in that sentence.

He shortened his speech because of the reception he got from his father. And so this morning, I want you to consider where you are in the story as we close this time. I know when I studied it, I saw the younger son and the older son in myself. You might be the younger son right now or you may have been the younger son.

My incredibly tactless uncle whom I mentioned earlier had two boys and one of them, named Kenny, was like a brother to me growing up. And as you can imagine, after so many circumstances in his life, Kenny spent 25 years going down all kinds of cul-de-sac roads of drugs and drinking and left some children born, not in a marriage situation, who were very developmentally and physically deformed, probably because of his drug use. He left a long string of pain. There were days and weeks and months we didn't know whether he was dead or alive.

And of all the people in his life, my grandmother left a light on for that boy. And it wasn't until a few years after she died that that prodigal cousin of mine whom I love like a brother came back and for the last ten years, loves God and tells other people whom he knows who have a prodigal son in their lives, "You can't fix this. It's not your job to fix it. It's your job to leave a light on." And you might have been the younger son or are the younger son and you need to hear this warning. There is no distance you can travel from God that there isn't joyous restoration in your return.

You might know a younger son. It might be a child of yours. It might be a pain, the likes of which you've never experienced before and you feel almost like a wild animal without hope. And this story is for you, that of the two characters, the one who seemed the farthest away from God was actually not the one who

was the most lost. And your challenge is...How do you love well? And how do you leave a light on for someone when you don't know whether or not they'll ever come back?

And then maybe the question for all of us collectively as a community that's just as important is...What kind of church will we be? Will we be the kind of church where people feel that unless they're cleaned up and have their lives together, they're not welcome here? Or will we be a community that smiles easily when we see the younger brother, that isn't shocked at all and has grace and welcoming whether they're in the middle of their story or repentant? And will we be those kinds of people here in this church and at Pete's and in our neighborhood and with our families and in our workplaces where our gravitational pull isn't away from that rebel, but toward them, like Jesus?

Because Jesus wasn't only the shepherd and the woman. He's the father in this story, but He's also the younger son. He became a prodigal son for our sake and left His Father's estate for a distant country. And He gave up all He had and He returned home through the Cross so you and I, whether we are the elder brother or the younger brother, are kind of like atheists because we embrace a faith that doesn't require us to obey in order to be good enough, but a faith that causes us to respond to a God who says, "You are good enough because of My work on the Cross and you are accepted." That ought to radically change who we are on a regular basis and I hope next week, we have some ushers with some crash helmets back there.

Let's pray: Father, for myself and all of us in this room, I ask that we would understand the kind of grace You give us, that when our failings happen on a daily basis, we would understand how radically forgiven we are, that we would come to understand the gospel in a way that takes our breath away and allows us not only to experience your grace, but then to easily offer it to other people. I pray You would become in our hearts and our minds the amazingly good God You are in reality and that we would live with an ease of forgiving each other and forgiving ourselves and repenting often. I thank You for this series of three stories that show us what kind of a God You are. I thank You for all of this in the Son's name, Jesus, Amen.