

Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

We love stories of joyful homecomings and reunions. Today’s story of joy is a parable told by Jesus about the overwhelming joy of a son’s return to his father.

This week we turn to “joy,” one of the fruit of the spirit listed by Paul in Galatians. There is no better illustration of joy than Jesus’ parable of the prodigal, which brings together an earthly and a heavenly homecoming. But first, let’s consider what we mean by joy.

In its essence, joy transcends happiness in that joy is not occasioned by circumstances but is a state of mind and heart that enables us to interact with

others in very surprising ways. In this well-known parable, contrast the joy of the Father with the utter lack of joy that we see in the polder brother.

Here is more on joy from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, one of my favorite resources for biblical studies.

C. S. Lewis called joy an “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.” He labels it “joy” and says that it “must be sharply distinguished both from happiness and from pleasure” (Lewis, 17–18). Lewis found joy because he found God as its source.

With nearly four hundred instances of the specific vocabulary of joy and rejoicing, joy is a major motif in the Bible. While there is joy in human life in the earthly realm, such as joy at a victory (Ps 20:5) or a harvest (Is 9:3), its overwhelming context is spiritual. The emphasis is encapsulated in famous verses expressing the sentiment that “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10 NIV) and petitioning God to “restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Ps 51:12 NIV). Joy and rejoicing are a special preoccupation in the psalms (approximately 80 references) and the Gospels (approximately 40 references).

Joy is a by-product of life with God. Joy is not found by seeking it as an end in itself. It must be given by God (Job 8:21; Ps 4:7; 36:8). Therefore, it is received by faith with the gift of salvation (1 Sam 2:1; Ps 5:11; 13:5; 20:5; 21:1, 6; 33:21; 35:9; 40:16; Is 12:1; 25:9; Hab 3:18; Lk 1:47; 2:10). In the OT, joy comes with God’s presence (1 Chron 16:27; Job 22:21–26; Ps 9:2; 16:5–11). In the NT that presence is identified as the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52; Rom 15:13; Gal 5:22; Eph 5:18, 19; 1 Thess 1:6).

For Paul and other NT writers there is a paradox to joy, for it prevails in the midst of afflictions. On this side of heaven, Christians can live joyfully in a fallen world, during the most intense persecution and through the worst affliction. A vignette of this joy in suffering is offered as Paul and Silas are in a Philippian jail, praying and singing hymns at midnight (Acts 16:25). Followers of Christ have the powerful and guiding image of the Savior who endured the cross for the “joy set before him” (Heb 12:2). . . .

In summary, joy is experienced through God’s means of grace in the midst of life. Knowledge of God’s Word produces joy (Ps 19:8; 119:16, 111, 162, 165; Jer 15:16), worship evokes it (Ps 42:4; 43:4; 46:4; 71:23; 100:1; Lk 24:52; Jas 5:13), obedience discovers it (Ps 32:11; 64:10; 68:3; 69:32; 87:1–5; 97:11; 119:1; Prov 10:28; 13:9; 29:6) and work fosters it (Deut 12:18; Ezra 6:22; Eccles 2:24, 25).

The Bible describes the “deep power of joy” by demonstrating it to be more powerful, more constant and more enduring than adverse circumstances (Jn 16:20–32; Acts 16:25, 34; Rom 14:17; 2 Cor 6:10; 7:4; 8:2; 12:10; Phil 4:4). In fact the Bible urges Christians to be joyful when suffering persecution for the faith, (Lk 6:22, 23) because in it they identify with their Savior (1 Pet 4:13). Every trial is an opportunity for joy, because it furthers the Christian’s sanctification (Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 1:8). The Bible not only exhorts people of faith to find joy in suffering, it says that God will give joy at the end of difficulty as a foretaste of the final redemption (Ps 30:5, 11, 12; 51:8; 53:6; 85:6; 126:5, 6; Is 35:1, 2, 10). Joy is the believer’s strength in the midst of affliction (Neh 8:10–12; Ps 28:7).

At the end of his autobiography, C. S. Lewis captures the essence of joy both as a by-product of earthly life with Christ and as a foretaste of the Christian’s eternal life with the Savior: “It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. . . . When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries, ‘Look!’ the whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority

that set them up. But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. ‘We would be at Jerusalem’ ” (Lewis, 238).¹

On to the parable!

The Parable of a Father and Two Sons

One of the most familiar of all Jesus’ parables, you probably know today’s Scripture passage as “The Parable of the Prodigal² Son.” The trouble with this title or any other is that the title immediately takes your attention to one character or aspect of the story. But, I have on my desk (my laptop actually) nine different commentaries on this parable and each one takes a somewhat different tack. Some authors identify with the father and his boundless joy at the return of the younger son. Other authors want to focus on the reaction of the elder son and his declaration of unfairness. All of these are helpful, but this is an incredibly rich and complex story which will repay many return visits. Preachers often preach it in at least two parts. Read it at different times in your own life and you will hear a message you hadn’t heard before. Thus, rather than provide you with one explanation among many, I’ll give you some background that may help you to see the surprises.

Some Helpful Background

- This parable and the two that immediately precede it (see the page four text box) are Jesus’ response to chattering among some Pharisees who are appalled that Jesus eats with tax collectors and assorted sinners. Tax collectors were despised by Jews because they worked as “entrepreneurs” who would collect as much money as they could, send to Rome what the empire required, and then keep the rest. They were seen as Jews who had sold-out to the pagan oppressors.
- When the younger son asks for his inheritance, it would have been shameful and humiliating for the father. The son is dishonoring his father, in violation of Torah. It is as if he wishes the father dead. Indeed, in the original Greek, the father literally divides his *bios*, his “life,” between the two sons. Jesus’ listeners would have understood how much the father had been shamed, making the father’s joyful and unconditional welcome all the more shocking. Indeed, most listeners probably thought that the father had been pampering an immoral and poorly raised son.
- We all know that Jews don’t eat pork. But under the OT law, Jews were forbidden from even touching the carcass of a dead pig (Leviticus 11:7-8). Jesus shows the younger brother caring for swine (and even willing to eat what they eat!) so that Jesus’ listeners will understand that the young man could sink no lower. He had rendered himself unclean and placed himself outside the covenant with God. Jesus’ listeners would have been happy for the story to end there and probably expected it to. The wayward son had gotten what he was due for dishonoring his father.
- When the younger son returns, the father runs to greet him. Running was seen as undignified for an elderly Jewish man. Given the typical attire, he

¹ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 464–466.

² “Prodigal” is not a word most of us use. It means to spend lavishly or foolishly.

would have had to grab up the hem of his long robe and go charging down the path! Such deep and profound joy. The father gives the son the family ring and sandals because they are both symbols that the father is welcoming him as a son, even though the younger son has said he'd be happy to return home as a hired hand. To Jesus' listeners, the father's complete and unquestioning welcome would have been shocking and offensive; doesn't the father have any pride!

- The elder son's behavior is also very insulting to the father. His refusal to enter the house or even speak to his father was an offense that would warrant a beating! Note that Jesus doesn't tell us the response of the elder son. The parable ends with the conclusion up in the air.

A few reflections

You can almost picture Jesus turning his gaze to the nearby Pharisees as the story moves to the reaction of the elder son. Could Jesus possibly mean that they, the defenders of the faith, were as the elder brother, unable to see the power of God's grace and forgiveness? Might they resent God's pouring out grace wherever God chooses? **Where is their joy at the return of the lost?**

Jesus Tells Three Parables

Any biblical passage is easier to understand if we put it in context. This is true even of the parables. Though each parable is its own self-contained story, you'll find it helpful to look at the paragraphs immediately preceding and following a parable. Today's parable is a good example.

In the opening verses of chapter 15, Luke tells us that assorted tax collectors and sinners are gathered around Jesus. Nearby Pharisees are offended that Jesus would welcome all the wrong sorts of people into his company. After all, the Pharisees wouldn't be seen in such company, much less eat with them. Jesus responds to the Pharisees by telling three parables. The first parable is about a shepherd's joy in finding one lost sheep from a flock of one hundred (15:3-7). The second parable is about the joy of a woman who lost a single coin and then found it, after working long and hard to find it (v. 8-10). Finally, Jesus turns to today's parable and a father's joy in finding a long-lost son. It doesn't take much imagination to predict the reaction of those who criticized Jesus' welcoming of sinners.

Through the Old Testament prophets, God had promised a celebration upon the restoration of Israel. How could Jesus imply that they, the Pharisees, would be left out while all the wrong sorts would enjoy the barbecue!

You can also picture the joy and wonder that must have come across the faces of the "tax collectors and sinners" as the story unfolded, a story of absolute and unconditional forgiveness; a story in which all are welcome to God's party. It is no accident that Jesus hung out with the outcasts of society. By his very symbolic actions – like eating with tax collectors – he demonstrated that *everyone* could be forgiven and welcomed into God's kingdom.

In the same way, it isn't hard to imagine the hope that must have sprung up in the hearts of all those nearby who were neither Pharisees nor obvious "sinners." It is a story that Jesus' fellow Jews wanted to hear, a story of exile and restoration. Perhaps, after so many centuries of oppression, God was at last going to forgive the sins of Israel and truly deliver them from exile, ushering in the kingdom of God. Perhaps that big day was finally upon them. Talk about rejoicing!!

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Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Judges*

This class will continue our study of the book of Judges.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

This class will continue with our study of the book of Acts.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

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