



Message | Showing mercy to the undeserving

Main Point:

In the well-known story of the Lost Son, Jesus spoke directly to the Pharisees, who were judging the gentiles and treating them with contempt. They were acting like the older brother of the prodigal. He too did not believe his younger brother deserved his father's mercy. Are we prepared to go in search for the lost, and ready to show mercy to those who are undeserving of our compassion?

Intro | When the undeserving disturb our world

I need to start with an apology and a note of gratitude. Everyone has noticed that the introduction of a new puppy in my life, has sent me into a stressful mess. My beautifully, ordered and structured life, was suddenly thrown into disarray when I brought home a gorgeous, furry bundle of cuteness – who had a mouth of very sharp teeth, and who didn't seem to know where the toilet was.

My whole world was disrupted. No longer could I go on my run when I wanted. Nor could I jump in the car and visit people when it suited.

And ... all this disruption was caused by a dog ... of all things!

We've all experienced disruptions in our lives.

For example, I'm sure many of the women here today remember when your husband suddenly retired. All of a sudden your nice, orderly home was thrown into disarray as your husband wanted to take charge of how the home was run – as if you haven't been doing that for 30 years!

Or maybe your adult son or daughter unexpectedly arrives on your doorstep, their life having fallen apart. Suddenly the spare room is no longer empty, the laundry pile is much bigger, and the months in advance holiday books are thrown out the window.

But have you noticed, not all of life's disruptions are created equal?

When a new baby arrives, it is a welcomed disruption. Life gets put on hold, and looking after the new demanding bub becomes the priority – everyone knows this and they rightly don't expect too much from the new mum.

But, what about when the disruption is caused by something that we don't feel deserves the right to rearrange our lives?

Like when your sister unexpectedly decides she doesn't want the funeral to be held at her home, and suddenly everyone's plans are disrupted.

Well, in the story that Jesus told in today's passage, a story most of us know very well, there is a family in which many lives are disrupted.

I'd like us to look at this familiar story from a completely different angle.

I'd like us to place ourselves inside the story and imagine that we are privy to the thoughts of one specific character.

Rather than focus our attention on the prodigal son, let's imagine that we are the older brother's manservant or personal butler. This really allows us to see how things played out from the older brother's perspective.

So, let's recall what happened. Your master is the heir of a very wealthy family. The patriarch, we'll call him Eli, has two sons. The older son, we'll call him Eliezer is the primary heir. You are his attendant, his main confidant. Unlike many others, you are privy to his struggles, his complaints and his gripes about what goes on in his father's household. There is also a younger brother, we'll call him Zebadiah and he has his own staff.

A few months ago, Zeb who has always been somewhat of a black sheep of the family, successfully convinced his father to give him his portion of the family inheritance, so he could go travelling, see the world, and live life as he wanted. (Luke 15:11-13)

The audacious nature of Zeb's request deeply angered your master, Eliezer.

It not only meant his inheritance was now greatly reduced, but the entire household saw how devastated his father had become.

The family had enjoyed great respect amongst the community. While everyone had shaken their heads, when they heard of what Zeb had done, and muttered with disappointment over his folly, they inwardly resolved *they* would never grant such a request should their own son ever ask.

But that disastrous incident occurred months ago. While the family business had struggled initially, things had finally settled into a nice predictable pattern of growth. Because your master, Eliezer was a hard worker, always thinking about how to improve and expand the family business, he threw himself into turning the family business around after his brother's departure. He was sure this would please his father.

In fact, only a few weeks ago you had heard him say, 'it was probably better Zeb had left, for he had never contributed much toward the family business anyway.'

Then everything changed.

Your master was, as usual, out in the field. Word came that the Zeb, that rascal, had returned. (Luke 15:25)

Immediately, you heard your master mutter, "Ha! Well, I suppose we could use a few more hands out in the field. It would do him the world of good to spend a few months working with the other hired hands. Hard work *is* the best teacher."

But, the messenger exclaimed. "No, your father, has already killed the fattened calf, and is inviting all the townsfolk to a grand feast. He's already given him the family robe. He is so overjoyed that your brother has returned home." (15:22)

A deep shade of grey spread over your master's face.

Finally, these words thundered out of his mouth,

"There is no way I'm setting foot inside that house until he is sent to the workshed. He can earn back what he took from us." (Luke 15:28)

Now, we in the 21st century can easily understand Eliezer's anger.

As parents, we know how we would feel if one of our children had time and time again spent all our money on things which were clearly no good. We too would quickly tire from opening our wallet.

We too would question the wisdom of opening our home, or the spare room.

We too would wonder whether the behaviour will continue.

But, in biblical times, a son's refusal to attend their father's banquet was the height of rudeness.

So, tentatively you question your master, "Are you sure, that is wise?"

And you hear him say,

"He doesn't deserve to return scot-free. He doesn't just owe my father all the money he owes, he owes me what he took from my inheritance!"

Like me, when a new puppy arrived home, the brother's whole world had been cast into disarray.

He had never been disobedient. He had followed all his father's orders (v29).

But, now he had been displaced.

No longer was he the only faithful and favourite son.

No longer was he the one for whom the father chose to kill the fattened goat.

You try, until you're blue in the face, to convince him otherwise. But, your master Eliezer is stubborn, and he flatly refuses to budge.

In what can only be described as a remarkable, and unheard-of gesture, the father, Eli, leaves the party and pleads with his son to join the festivities.

But, from an offended heart Eliezer responds, "after all I have done for you, how can you treat me so poorly. You have never treated me this way. Yet this son of yours [I can't even bring myself to call him by name] the son who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (v30)

But then the Father bares his heart,

"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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." (v31-32)

When the Pharisees heard this sum up of the story, it would have been as shocking to their ears, as to ours.

How can the father be so merciful and compassionate towards one who has hurt him and his family so much?

How can the father forget his son's foolishness and flippancy?

How can he so swiftly welcome him back with full status as a son and heir?

The practical implications of this story really hit me this week.

None of us like it when our world is thrown into disarray.

None of us like it when we are no longer in control of deciding when and how we do the things we want to do.

But, most of all, none of us like it when someone *undeserving* is the cause of it all.

We get irritated. We get stressed. We get upset.

But, when we look at this story and compare it with the others that come before it, we find an even more startling difference.

In the story of the lost sheep (15:1-7) and the lost coin (15:8-10), there is an element that is blaringly absent from the story of lost son.

Notice in the story of the lost sheep, Jesus said, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes in search of the lost sheep until he finds it' (15:2).

And again, in the story of the lost coin. We read, "she lights a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds it?" (15:8)

But, where is the searching in the story of the lost son?

Rather than focussing on building and expanding the family business, why didn't the older son go in search of his younger brother, to plead with him to return?

Wasn't that the father's greatest desire?

In our New Testament reading today, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we read, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Do you hear the pleading, "Be reconciled to God"?

In our story today, the older son was focussed on pleasing his father and obeying his commands. These are good things.

But, unfortunately, he didn't seem to understand that his father's greatest desire was the restoration of his son to the family.

Application |

I pray that each and every one of us will be wholeheartedly focussed, not just on pleasing our heavenly Father, and obeying his commands – but also on being intimately aware of our Father's heart.

The Father's greatest desire is for his lost children to be restored back to the family.

So, what's your attitude towards the lost in our community?

Are you inwardly thinking, we are better off without them?

They'll just cause a mess if they come, anyway?

Or are we so in tune with the Father's heart, that we'll go in search of the lost, pleading with them to be reconciled to God?