

# Why Spread the Good News?

## INTRODUCTION

I once saw the great Russian ballet dancer Mikael Baryshnikov dance to Ballanchine's choreographed rendition of "The Prodigal Son." The most powerful moment of the ballet came when Baryshnikov, playing the prodigal and dressed in a skeleton-like leotard, returns to beg forgiveness from his father. In the closing moments of the ballet as the father cradles his son tenderly in his arms, we watch the son rest his head on his father's chest in exhausted comfort. He is home at last, and that is all that matters.

Why does this story of Jesus, told to orthodox Jewish believers over two thousand years ago, still pack such a wallop, even today? Because Jesus taps into the deepest, most primal of human emotions: *there's a child in desperate trouble*. And as a result, relationships in the family have been broken, parents are grieving, anxiety abounds. Will the lost child find his way home again? Will the parents' broken hearts be mended? Will the child be restored and become whole?

## GROUP DISCUSSION

Think of a time you lost something extremely valuable and precious. How did you feel? Was it returned? If so, describe your feelings.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

How do you regard unbelievers who have messy lives—with compassion or with a judgmental, critical spirit? Why?

The parable we are going to read is set in a context of three stories. First, Jesus tells us that a shepherd has lost one of his one hundred sheep. He goes to great lengths to find that lost sheep and when he finds it he rejoices greatly. Jesus then says, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7). In other words, God's desire to find sinners and bring them back into the fold is beyond what we could fathom.

Next, Jesus tells the story of the woman who lost a coin. She searches thoroughly with the aid of a lamp until it turns up. The implication is that disciples should diligently engage in the search for sinners on behalf of the Great Shepherd they serve.

In the parable of the prodigal son we continue to see the seeking-of-sinners theme that helps us understand our proper motive for sharing the good news.

### ***Read Luke 15:1-2, 11-32***

1. Why did Jesus feel the need to tell this story?

2. The inheritance was normally given to sons after the death of the father. The younger son's share would be one-third and the older son's two-thirds of the father's wealth (Deuteronomy 21:17). How do you think the Jewish crowd who was listening to the story felt in hearing that the younger son pushed for his share of the inheritance (vv. 11-12)?

3. In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, children were not only raised to obey the law but to stay close as a family unit. How would the Pharisees react on hearing the further antics of this son (v. 13)?

4. How would the boy's job be the worst imaginable occupation for a child who was probably raised in a kosher kitchen (vv. 14-15)?

5. This boy's actions would have been utterly repelling to the listeners. What types of people do you find hard to reach out to?

6. What do you think led this boy into sin and rebellion?

7. How does Jesus describe the nature of repentance?

Although repentance is always a mystery in the end, what factors seemed to influence the son's repentance?

8. After hearing a story in which Jesus deliberately pressed all their buttons, what might the Pharisees and teachers of the law expect the father's response to be?

9. Jesus gives us one of the most beautiful portraits of God the Father seen in Scripture. Name everything that the father does (vv. 20-24).

10. Jesus' point is that we are so precious to God and he is so loving by nature that the mere act of repentance brings an absolute reversal of status. The lost son has become a family member again. The father's acceptance of the penitent son is total. How does this radical view of God's grace square with your understanding of God's attitude toward you?

11. What was wrong with the elder son's understanding and experience of faith that he refused to go to the party (vv. 25-30)?

12. Why is a judgmental, critical spirit so frequently the "disease of the devoted," as was the case of the Pharisees?

13. Reflect on the father's response of complete joy to his son's return. How can you allow this attitude to shape your attitude toward people you find repelling?

### **PRAYER**

*Thank the Lord for the many ways he has delivered you from evil and shown you mercy in spite of your sins. Ask him to enlarge your heart so that his compassion and love will flow through you to those who have not found their way home yet.*

### **NOW OR LATER**

Take time to thank God with your whole heart for your salvation. Try to imagine yourself as a "mouse in the corner" in heaven when God threw a celebration party for your conversion. Thank God for each person he used to reach you.