

Summary: What if the angry, disappointed God you were taught to fear was never real... and Jesus came to prove it?

Main Ideas:

Religion makes us feel we are always one sin away from being rejected.
God isn't waiting to reject us. He's running to embrace us.
Jesus embraces the people that religion rejects.
Religion tells us our performance can purchase God's love.
Jesus illustrates that God's love is for everyone.
God is not waiting for perfection... just for us to take the first step home.
God has never and will never give up on you.
God isn't interested in how well you perform your repentance... He just wants you home.
There is nothing in your past, present, or future that disqualifies you from God's immediate love and forgiveness.
Experiencing forgiveness empowers you to offer forgiveness.
Religion rejects and separates. Jesus forgives and restores.

Invitation:

Read Luke 15 at least 3 times this week.

- How have I been running?
- Who do I need to offer restoration to?

Discussion Questions:

1. Read Luke 15:11–24 together. What line or moment stood out to you in a fresh way this time?
2. Why do you think religion often paints a picture of God as disappointed or distant?
3. The father doesn't wait for an apology, but he runs to embrace the son. Why is it so hard for us to believe that forgiveness can be given before we “earn it” or “deserve it”?
4. What's one step you can take this week to either come home to God or extend that same kind of forgiveness to someone else?
5. How can your group pray with you this week?

Transcript:

ME: “Show picture of my family.”

One thing I love about my wife is that I can be completely myself with her.

- No pretending. No performance. No eggshells to avoid.

I can make any dumb joke and, depending on the moment, she'll either laugh, roll her eyes, or ignore it entirely and just keep talking.

But I never have to hide.

- I don't have to calculate every word.
- I know she loves me for me, and she's not walking out the door.

I appreciate this about her so much... b/c the opposite is just so exhausting... Eggshell people

WE: You ever meet someone and just know... "Yep. I'm definitely going to offend this person someday"?

As a pastor? It's almost instinctual.

- Nice to meet you. (Internal thought: You'll probably be mad and gone in six months.)

With eggshell people, you're constantly evaluating everything.

- What you say and how you say it.
- You're not free to be lighthearted or honest... because they're not a safe place.

So you never get close.

- Because the second they're offended enough, or often enough... you're out.

And sadly... this is how a lot of people imagine God.

- Fragile. Unpredictable.

Waiting for you to say or do the wrong thing just one too many times... and then you're out.

- Just can't wait to smite us with his holy smiter

It's funny until we realize some of us have built our whole view of God around it.

Religion makes us feel we are always one sin away from being rejected.

- Mess up? You're out.
- Push too far? Rejected.
- Start to doubt? Just looking for an excuse to sin.

And maybe that's exactly why some of you, or your kids, a friend, a sibling, left the church.

- They got tired of trying to measure up.
- Got tired of pretending.
- Tired of wondering if God was always a little bit disappointed.

But what if the thing that makes people reject God was never God in the first place?

B/c here's the truth we've been seeing in this series...

- God is not fragile
- He's not easily offended.
- He's not drafting a list of sins, just waiting to unfollow you.

He is stable. Solid. Safe.

And when Jesus tells one of his most powerful stories, he shatters this angry God image once and for all.

Because in this story, a runaway son expects rejection... But finds something so much better.

- Not wrath. Not distance. Not punishment.
- But forgiveness... And welcome.

Jesus proved... God isn't waiting to reject us. He's running to embrace us.

GOD: Here's how it all begins...

Luke 15:1 *Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.*

Can we let that sink in for a second?

- Can you see the difference between Jesus and our modern church?

"Tax collectors and NOTORIOUS sinners OFTEN came to listen to Jesus preach."

- People who were nothing like Jesus loved being around Jesus.

Why? B/c... Jesus embraces the people that religion rejects.

The tax collectors and sinners loved listening to Jesus because he didn't just tolerate them, he actually enjoyed them and loved them.

Their whole lives, they were told: "You've blown it. God wants nothing to do with you anymore."

And then... Jesus comes and pulls up a seat.

But of course.. Jesus' acceptance always bothers certain people...

Luke 15:2 *This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!*

The religious leaders, men who were admired for how well they followed the rules, watched Jesus pull up a chair to this table of outcasts... and they were furious.

'He eats with them?!'

- Eating with someone was solidarity. Family. Acceptance.

In their minds, holiness was earned through distance

- Through ritual and separation from people like that.

Pharisees thought they were close to God b/c they acted holy and religious

- They thought God wanted holy bribes.

Religion tells us our performance can purchase God's love.

- If we just behave better, God will owe us something.

So right away, we have two groups of people who don't understand who God really is.

- Who both view God as an angry deity... Who sits on his throne and makes sure people aren't doing all those bad things they secretly want to do.

One group "knows" they are out, and the other is convinced they are "in."

- Neither knew God very well...

So what does Jesus do?

- He tells three short stories...
- That completely transformed what they thought they knew about God.

In the first two stories, about a lost sheep and a lost coin...

- Someone drops everything, hunts down what's lost, and when they find it, they throw a party.

And in the third story, we see how Jesus, God in a body, chose to explain as clearly as possible his heart for his children.

As we look at this story, ask yourself a couple of questions...

- Are you more often the ashamed outsider... or the judging insider?
- (Or—if we're honest—both on the same day?)

We harbor judgments about those who are different from us or who have made poor choices.

- We think some people are unworthy of God's love.

On the flip side, many of us carry the burden of believing we are unworthy and unloved.

- We try to hide from God rather than enjoy him.

Jesus tells a different story and illustrates that God's love is for everyone.

It's one of the most important stories Jesus told

- not because it's dramatic, but because we all live it in some way.

Luke 15:11-12 *To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.*

What a jerk.

The younger son asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive.

- Basically saying... Dad, you just won't die, so give me your stuff now.
- Actually wishing his father dead.

In that culture and time (and still today), this was hugely disrespectful and deeply hurtful.

- It showed a complete rejection of his family for what his inheritance could give him.

He's driven by self. Desire. Maybe even greed. But not love.

- Prioritizing what he wants over his father and family.

That's sin.

- At its core, sin says, 'What I want is more important than you.'
- It leads us away from love and connection, causing pain to ourselves and those we care about.

As the story continues, we see this principle play out...

Paraphrase v. 13-16

The son leaves to a far off country...

The loving father lets him make his own choices. **Doesn't force him to stay.**

He runs, burns through everything, and ends up broke, filthy, feeding pigs, and so hungry the pig food starts looking good.

And when he hits rock bottom... he starts seeing things more clearly.

Luke 15:17-19 *When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."*

This is the turning point in the story!

The son finally realizes how empty his choices have left him.

- He had chased fulfillment in all the wrong places and ended up starving and alone.

And if we're honest... we all go there.

- Maybe it wasn't spending your inheritance, but maybe it was seeking approval, love, or escape in all the wrong places..

And when we do, we face a choice: do we keep running from our Heavenly Father, or do we turn and come home?

The son believes his failures disqualify him from being loved.

- He plans to return, not as a son, but as a servant... hoping to earn back a sliver of approval.
- What he doesn't understand yet is that his father's love was never based on behavior.

It's the same with God. His love can't be earned, only received.

God is not waiting for perfection... just for us to take the first step home.

And what comes next in the story changes everything we think we know about God...

Luke 15:20a *So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming.*

The son's walking back home, probably rehearsing his apology for the 100th time, head down, heart pounding, hoping for at least a scrap of mercy.

The father saw him a long way off... he had constantly been scanning the horizon. Waiting for his son to come home.

- Why?

- So he could tell his son off? "I told you so..."
- Get his money back?

Think about the religious people in your past/life... how would you expect them to react?

- Your parents?

How do we usually expect God to react?

But if this were your child, how would you react?

Luke 15:20b *Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.*

The son is nervous... he knows he's almost home, he's expecting to have to humiliate himself and grovel at his father's feet...

But as he starts to see his childhood home, he sees the last thing he expected...

- His dad sprinting at him... arms wide, eyes full of tears, zero hesitation.

The father doesn't wait for an explanation.

- He doesn't cross his arms and lecture.
- He runs. He hugs. He kisses.

Why? Because his son came home.

- That's it. That's the whole requirement: COME HOME.

And if you've pictured God with arms crossed, waiting to punish you... Jesus came to replace that picture forever.

God has never and will never give up on you.

The father wasn't filled with conditions or disappointment or offense.

- He was filled with love and compassion.
- And when you're filled with that kind of love... there isn't room for anything else.

But wait, had the son done anything to make amends yet?

Well, he tries to... and starts his rehearsed speech...

Luke 15:21-24

His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

The father says- "I don't care what's happened... I AM sorry you had to go through that, BUT you're here now... here's the best of everything I have... You never stopped being my son."

This isn't just generosity... it's reinstatement.

- The son isn't earning his spot back... he never lost it.

No Guilt trip...

- No... "Do you know what this has done to your mother?!"

- Doesn't make him confess all his failures to the village
- Doesn't make him pay him back

The son returned and the relationship is immediately healed.

Father instantly and completely gives the son the one and only thing that heals broken relationships... FORGIVENESS.

The only thing that restores relationships is forgiveness.

And here's the thing: the son never even finishes his apology speech.

- His father cuts him off. Why?
- Because forgiveness doesn't require groveling.
- The relationship was broken, and now it's restored. And that's worth celebrating.

God isn't interested in how well you perform your repentance... He just wants you home.

- He's not keeping score. He's planning a party.

So many of us come to God expecting criticism, but Jesus says what we'll actually find is a God running toward us with open arms.

See, here's the point...

- God isn't standing there holding a grudge, waiting to say 'I told you so.'
- He hasn't written you off. He's waiting to run.

This is the picture of himself, he wants us to have

- God running to us to offer forgiveness.

That's the whole point of Jesus coming.

- He came from heaven to earth to show us who God really is,
- and then demonstrated his love and forgiveness by dying and rising again for us

Now, there might be a voice in your head that pops up, it happens whenever I talk about this, that says...

- That's too easy!
- Talking like this gives people freedom to sin all the time...

Do you think that son would think like that?

- Do you think he'd try to find loopholes around what his father wants for him?

NO! He's living a life of thankfulness to his father... doing what the father wishes b/c he knows his father cares for him and he trusts his father.

He has truly experienced the fullness of his father's love.

- And to everyone who is willing to listen, he tells them how amazing his father is.

AND... when someone wrongs that son... do you think he holds it over THEIR head?

- Or is he quick to forgive and restore the way his father did for him?

YOU: Listen... If what you were taught about God left you afraid, unworthy, or never enough...

- Jesus came to correct that lie.

Religion says, "You messed up. You're out. And good luck earning your way back".

Jesus says, 'You're not too far. You're not too late. You're loved. Just come home.'

God isn't waiting to drop the hammer... He's waiting to wrap us up in love, forgiveness, and restoration.

The only thing standing in the way isn't him... It's us.

Jesus already did the work of restoring the relationship.

- All that's left is to admit we've been running and turn toward him.
- That's what confession is. Not guilt-tripping yourself, but being honest enough to come home.

Here's the best part: there is nothing in your past, present, or future that disqualifies you from God's immediate love and forgiveness.

Confession doesn't earn that... it simply accepts it.

And when you start living in that kind of forgiveness, something shifts.

- You finally breathe again.
- Grace makes room for healing even where you didn't think it could grow.
- You find freedom. Peace.

And maybe even the strength to let go of bitterness you've been holding toward someone else.

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending the hurt didn't happen—but it does mean letting God begin to heal it.

- Even if it takes time.
- Experiencing forgiveness empowers you to offer forgiveness.

So maybe you've been running, hiding, afraid of God's anger and disappointment.

- You can stop hiding/bribing and just come home

He's waiting to run to you.

Won't force it on you.

It's your choice.

If there's never been a point in your life that you accepted his love and forgiveness... now is your opportunity.

Just tell him. Jesus, I'm done running. I'm done hiding.

- I want to come home. I want to be your child. Forgive and restore me.

And for all of us...

Trust him. Trust his love. You are his child. He is not going to throw you out.

And b/c of the forgiveness we have received, we are free to give it to everyone else.

Invitation: Read Luke 15 at least 3 times this week.

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- Who do I need to offer restoration to?

WE: So, imagine being part of a community where no one had to pretend to be perfect.

Where people walked in, still covered in pig-slop decisions... and found a place at the table.

Imagine people who don't just know about grace... filter everything through it.

A church full of running fathers and mothers. Open arms. Constant welcome.

Not because sin doesn't matter... but because people matter more.

- And love, true, Jesus-shaped love is what brings them home

What if we lived like God wasn't keeping score anymore?

What if we stopped being known for what we condemn... And started being known for who we embrace?

Jesus told this story so we wouldn't just believe in God... but fall into the arms of the One who came running.

Religion rejects and separates. Jesus forgives and restores.

- And he will never give up on you.