

Find the Change You're Looking For

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Date: 22 March 2026

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[0:00] Well, good morning. Lovely to be with you. Thanks, Sir Graham, for inviting me along.! Obviously, you've been going through a few services in particular that have been trying to,! I guess, encourage you, if you are not a Christian, to explore the Christian faith, hearing people's stories, hearing from the Bible. And I hope if you've come back to hear more, today would be an encouraging morning for you. I don't want to assume everyone in the room actually right now is a Christian or has been to church before. As Graham said at the beginning, if you're unfamiliar with church, hopefully this is already starting to get you to ask questions. Over the next 20 minutes, 25 minutes, I'm going to start my timer now to hold me to that. If I go over 25, you can do a big clang of noise and say you've over-promised and under-delivered. Okay, I'm going to start it now. For the next 20 or so minutes, I'm just going to try and help us understand this a little bit more. For Christians, the Bible, which we've just read, is what we would be kind of God's main text, his main primary text that he has ordained for Christians to be able to read and understand who he is, what he's done, how we relate to him, and the way in which the world functions both now and what is to come. That's a bit of what the Bible does. What is not is an A to Z. It doesn't give you every answer to life. I like to think of it a bit like my kid's Guinness Book of Records, yeah. It tells us the important stuff, the significant stuff, the stuff that we need to recognize and understand. So that's what I'm going to do for the next few minutes. And if you are obviously familiar with church, I hope this again encourages you and strengthens your convictions and your belief. Let me ask you quickly first though, are you a shoes person? Are you a shoes person?

I can see some looks. I can see some looks. Hands up if you're kind of into your shoes, you like your shoes. Yeah, it's okay. You can put them up with a bit of pride. Hands up if you don't really care about shoes. Okay, you're all liars because you're all wearing some. We all wear shoes, eh? We all wear shoes. You've all come out the house with shoes on. The reason I say that, I'm going to put you in the shoes of a few people in this story. So please get it back open. I'm scurrying through here just to make sure I get to the right pair. Get that back open for me, please, the story we've got here. And it was said a couple of times, this is the story of the prodigal son, which again, if you've never heard anything about that, that sounds bizarre. This is a story that Jesus tells about a father who has two sons and they go on different journeys, obviously, and they have a different relationship with the father. We heard earlier on, didn't we, through the kids' talk that a parable is, I love that little definition, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And all I'm going to do is walk us through it and put us in the shoes of different people as we go. Does that sound all right?

Wonderful. Now, for us to really understand this first, you've got to actually go to the big number 15 and a little number one. So quickly, if you can, in your Bible, look back to that or scroll back up to that, because this helps us understand why is Jesus telling this story at this point?

Chapter 15, verse 1 tells us this. Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Right, here's what's going on. Jesus, who is the central figure to the Christian faith, the person in which Christians believe is God's own son come from heaven to earth, is walking amongst the streets, going to the towns and the villages and teaching people about who

God is, who he is, and why he's come to planet earth. Now, amongst the people that he's walking around and seeing and talking and interacting with, there's often two responses. There's people who want to find out more. They're hungry. They're eager. They're saying, tell me more. I want to follow you.

And there's people who are pretty concerned, arms crossed, pushing him away, rejecting him. And more often than not, you find them in these two categories that we get introduced to in here, chapter one.

We've got the tax collectors and sinners. They very much are what you might call the outcasts of society at the time. Tax collectors really were the enemy. They didn't like them as the tax man, essentially. And the people at the time often believed those tax collectors were not only getting money in for the state, they were getting money in for their pockets. And sinners really is the catchphrase all for people who were rascals, people who'd made bad choices, people who had done bad things to other people. Sinners is a word we don't have much familiarity with, I guess, these days, but was a common word used back then to describe people who were really ultimately not very nice to be around. So you've got these groups of people. Then you've got these other groups. Look at verse two, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Now the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were religious people at the time who had a degree of authority and responsibility to try and represent God to the people of the town, of the city, of the place. And they often taught the Bible. They would hold gatherings like this. They would lead religious ceremonies and they would try and help people come to understand who God was. Now some of the stuff they did in its rightful time and place was very, very important. It really was. But unfortunately a lot of them at the time thought and believed that you had to follow a set of rules. The only way to God was meeting his standard, following the rules, abiding by the law. And then Jesus shows up. And Jesus starts to do things that no one had ever really seen a religious person do. Jesus started to say things that no one had ever really heard a religious person say. And then Jesus started to claim things about himself that no one had ever claimed on planet earth. Mainly saying he was God's son. Come to earth to bring people back to God.

[6:01] So they're raging. They are raging. Who is this guy? What's he doing? Why is he hanging out with him? Why is he spoken to her? How dare he? Does he not know what he's up to? And so Jesus tries to help him understand. No, no. Why I've come is really important. And let me tell you a few stories. So then he gets into it. So it's quite helpful to you to know. Otherwise jumping straight in, I think, at verse 11, sometimes there's a bit confusion if you've never read it. So that's what's going on.

And we've got ourselves a few stories. Firstly, it's the lost sheep. Then we get the lost coin. And then as we're getting to number 11, we're getting the lost son. Or in the Bible, in the church here, it says the parable of the lost son. However, I'm calling it the father's compassion towards his sons. Look at it again with me. Number 11, Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. And after he'd spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country. And he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of the country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. Okay, you get the situation, yeah? Father, two sons, younger son, goes up to the dad and says, listen, dad, I want my share of the inheritance. I want my money. And we don't know too much about the father, but clearly he's got an estate. He's maybe got some money. He's either been a very wise father and saved a lot, or he's a very wealthy father and he's got the degree of inheritance. Inheritance was very significant back then and still can be to a lot of people today. And effectively, the younger son says, well, I want my portion now. Which if you start to put two and two together is another way of him saying, do you know what, dad? I found you a dead already because I want my money. Can I have it now? And I don't really want anything to do with you. The dad, as we read here, effectively just says yes and gives him his money.

[8:26] And therefore, where does he go next? Well, he takes his money. He rejects his relationship with the dad. He gathers all his stuff and he heads out where? To a distant land. What does he do? Spends the lot. Now we don't get much detail to it. Jesus decides not to give us that, but essentially it's summarizing the word wild living. I'll let you decide what wild living is because I'm sure we've all got different versions of wild living, but ultimately what's he done? He blows all the cash. He pursues some sort of fulfillment, satisfaction, life, buzz, thrill. He spends the lot in pursuit of something that he felt like he wasn't getting at home. Yeah? Where does he find himself? Well, look at it again.

Famine comes, money runs out, can't pay for anywhere to stay, clearly not got any mates, decides he needs to get a job to try and have some money, goes to a man of the country. And what does he give him? A job feeding the pigs. So he hits a bit of a low, doesn't he? Goes in from having a lot of money to living what he felt like his best life was, to now feeding pigs in a pigsty. And things get even worse because look at it, he becomes very, very hungry to the point where he starts to consider actually eating the food of the pigs. Now that's quite a bit of detail there as well that Jesus chooses the share, see, because amongst the Jewish people, you're eating your pork was not what you did.

Pigs were not seen as clean in any way. So this guy really has hit rock bottom. That's his circumstance. He's had a shocker, isn't he? I want you now the first pair of shoes to put on. Put yourself in the father's shoes for a second. How do you think the father's feeling at this point? Well, I've got two sons and a girl sandwiched in the middle. I love my boys and my girl very much so.

But if one of my boys was to come up to me and say, Dad, can you give me my share of the inheritance? I'd be pretty concerned right now, partly because I've got nothing to give him. But also because I don't really want us to depart. Like if a son came to me and said, do you know what, Dad?

[10:43] I kind of don't really fancy this setup anymore. I want some money because I'm taking off. I think you'd be pretty upset, wouldn't you? More so you'd be concerned. You would be distressed.

Your heart would be a mix of emotions because you, most fathers, I presume, would bring their child up in such a way at the home that it's a stable, loving environment where you care for their needs.

You provide and you bring them up in a way that at the right time they can set off and they can live a life. But to have to send your son off in these circumstances, put yourself in the shoes of the father.

It's tough, eh? No doubt his heart was breaking as he watched the back of his son's head just walk off into the distant land. So that's our first pair of shoes for us to consider.

Right, let's see what happens next. Pick it up with me. Remember, he's in the pig farm. He's looking at the pig food. He's about to stick it in his mouth. And then number 17, you there? When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare?

[11:53] And here I am starving to death. I will set out. Go back to my father and say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and he went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to him, quick, bring the best robe, put on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

See what happens next? What does Jesus say? He comes to his senses. I love that phrase. He comes to his senses. A moment of perspective, maybe a moment of conviction.

[12:56] See, because he stops and he remembers, wait a minute. What was home like? Even my father's servants will live in a better life than I

am. He maybe started to remember the love and the care of his father, the circumstances he lived in.

And so what does he decide to do? Sets out home. See it? He decides to head home. And in this moment of conviction, he actually starts to realize he needs to say, sorry, he needs to say something to try and reconcile his relationship with his father, doesn't he?

So he prepares a little speech. Goes a bit like this, doesn't it? He says, sorry, dad, I've screwed it up. I've sinned against you and against God. I don't deserve your love. Please make me like one of your servants.

I'll work for you. I'll pay it back. Now, was this genuine? I don't know. But I think we're encouraged to think it is. I think this is a genuine moment for him that he believes he got it wrong and he needs to go back home.

So what does he do? Well, he sets off. He sets off home, probably rehearsing the speech. Yeah, I've screwed it up. I'm sorry. I've sinned against you and God. Please forgive me. I'll work it back for you.

[14:08] You can imagine him, can't you? Walking the streets saying this over and over and over again, thinking, how is he going to respond? What's he going to do? And what happens next? Look at it.

Verse 19 finishes his speech. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him. Isn't that an amazing picture?

That his father saw him. See, put yourself in the father's shoes. Did many of you think about that longing to look out and see your son come back?

You can imagine it, can't you? Every morning, opening the curtains, standing at the door with the coffee, just kind of looking, hoping. Every night, shutting the curtains and just having a little look out just before he shuts it.

What's his father been doing the whole time? Longing. Desperately waiting, hoping that his son might just walk back around the corner.

[15:11] And for months and months and months, he never did. What a moment we find ourselves in here.

That as the father, in his desperation, in his despair, and in his hope to see his son, suddenly sees him. Oh, could you imagine that moment?

He kind of like looks out and he just sees, wait, wait a minute. Wait a minute. It's not him, is it? It's him. It's actually him.

Did you see what he does? He picks off his robes, which he would have been wearing at the time. And he walks. He strides. No, he stands still. No, what does he do? He runs after him.

He sprints down the road. And as he sees his son in front of him, he gives him a huge hug. And he kisses him. This is joy.

[16:08] This is unfiltered love to see his son once again. Oh, for the son in this moment. Could you imagine what he would have been thinking?

See, he's rehearsed the speech, hasn't he? Over and over and over and over and over. My dad's going to be raging. As he sees him running towards him, he's probably thinking he's going to come and knock his head off. He's rehearsed the speech and he gets into it.

Do you see it? Look at it again. He gets into his speech, doesn't he? Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. He didn't finish it though, did he?

Do you see that? I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. And what part was he meant to say next? Make me one of your servants. But what does the father do?

But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. See, this is a moment of amazing grace, of sheer mercy and love and compassion from a father who doesn't want his son to make it up to him and work it back and owe him.

[17:20] But simply welcomes him in with forgiveness and love and compassion. See, what the father does in this moment by getting the robe and getting the ring and getting the sandals and getting the calf.

He's not just simply accepting him back and much less making him a servant like the son wanted to. No, what the father is doing, he's actually picking symbols here. Symbols of like honor. Symbols of authority.

Symbols of freedom. He's given his son a status back in the home. He's restoring him back to sonship with him.

And how does he want to celebrate? By throwing an absolute rocking party. He is thrilled. Why? Because he thought his son was lost and dead.

But in fact, he's found him. And he's alive. It's an incredible moment as the father of compassion runs towards a son who screwed it up and forgives him of the lot.

[18:26] Now, I got you to put yourself in the shoes of the father, didn't I? Now I want to put you in the shoes of the son, the youngest son. See, what do you think is going on in his heart at this point?

He's thought he's in trouble. He thought he screwed it up. No way in his wildest dreams he probably imagined that his dad was going to put a party on when he came home.

He expected to work as a servant the whole time. So I don't know about you. I wonder if you've had a story similar to this or something like Derek's. I don't know any of you in the room really, but we've all on different journeys at different points.

And some of us have had big highs and I'm sure some of us have had some big lows, haven't we? But there's something that happens, isn't there, when that deep conviction comes on our heart.

When you know you really, really have screwed it up. It could be something big. It could be something like an affair. It could be a gross misconduct at work.

[19:33] It could be a criminal offense. You know that moment when you've done something seriously wrong. It could be smaller. Deceitful words. Harmful decisions.

Things done in the background that no one sees. But when your conscience eventually catches up with you and the conviction of the way that you have lived and treated other people gets a hold of your soul.

It's a tough thing to carry, isn't it? It's a really hard thing to carry. And I think most of us, when we get to that point, really all what we can do is put our hands up, isn't it?

Like the spotlight of a police helicopter. Eventually, you've got to go, no, you got me. I've got it wrong. See, what did the son deserve?

The son deserved punishment, didn't he? At least a consequence of some sort. Like, that's the right thing, isn't it? That the father must teach him a lesson.

[20:40] Give him a consequence. He essentially stuck his fingers up to him and said, I wish you were dead. It's the right thing to do when people screw it up. Yeah, what does he get?

What does he get? Not what his sins deserve. He finds forgiveness. He finds love. It's a remarkable act of grace displayed to us from the father.

I wonder right now if you could relate to that son in some way. Whether you are a follower of Christ or not, what does it look like for you today to be in the shoes of the younger son?

Well, there's one more son to talk about, isn't there? Let's just look at this briefly before we then come into close. Look at number 25. Meanwhile, whilst this is all going on, the older son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

[21:45] The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

My son, the father said, you're 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. So obviously in the background of all this is an older brother. Now he's not left home, but his relationship with his father doesn't seem particularly positive, does it?

He's working hard in the estate. And when he finds out that his younger brother comes back and dad's throwing a massive party with the big fat calf, he is raging. Why?

[22:49] Because he feels like he deserves something the same. Now again, we don't know the full story. We don't know what their relationship has been like and why it's been this way.

But he's refusing to go in because he feels like he deserves it. Yet what does the father do? Do you see it? Moves towards him. He comes out from the party and he engages in a conversation with his son.

And what does he try to help him see? Well, whilst you've lived with me, son, I have given you these things. I've given you the privileges of our home. Now, again, the older son believes he's not maybe had the big fat calf.

But what he's choosing to do is obviously not see the things that he already has had in a relationship with his father. And it kind of is left on a bit of a cliffhanger, isn't it? Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what happens with the older brother.

But what the son wants to remind this older brother is, your brother's back, mate. There's reason for us to be thankful. And he leaves it there.

[23:52] So that's our story. And if you've never heard it before, it's a bit of a roller coaster, isn't it? And as some have said, there's a familiarity to this story. So one of the dangers when you've heard a story lots of times is we start to slightly switch off.

And we don't really understand what it means for us today. So for the last few minutes, let me quickly help us think, what does this actually mean for us now today? We've got the story.

Let me summarize it one last time. A story about a father who's got two sons. The younger son is sick of being at home, so he decides to leave. Whilst he loses all his money, he gets homesick. He ends up coming back home. His father's thrilled and his older brother's sick about it.

That's the story, yeah? What does it actually mean? Well, as I said to you, chapter 15, verse 1 helps us understand what is going on whilst Jesus is saying these.

And ultimately, Jesus is doing two things as he tells this story to the listening ears of those around him. Firstly, he's extending a welcome to anyone who wants to come back into a relationship with God.

[24:50] And secondly, he's issuing a warning to anyone who thinks they can earn their way back to God in some kind of way. See, the welcome comes to the person who puts themselves in the shoes of the younger son, yeah?

I've talked briefly about that moment of conviction that we've got on our hearts. Well, God, in this moment, through Jesus, is trying to show everyone no one is outside of reach.

See, the father is God. Jesus, as he tells the story, is telling everyone the story of the big story of God. A God who made us, who loves us, who has designed us to live in relationship with him in the boundaries of his loving grace and mercy, so that we might flourish in life.

And yet, what have people done at various times and in various ways? Well, they've put their fingers up. They've pushed God out. They've wished he is dead, taken his possessions, and lived the life they thought was the one they needed to live.

And yet, what does God do in this moment? Well, like the father does, he runs towards us. The story of the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

[26:00] God himself sends his son to earth to bring us back into relationship with God. This is a welcome invitation to you this morning.

If you do not know God, that you are nowhere that he cannot find you. You are not too far out of reach. You've not screwed it up enough.

He will welcome you in. How does he do it? This is the most important bit. See, the father's love and compassion represents the father's love and compassion towards us.

Alongside a familiar parable, you might be familiar potentially with the verse John 3.16. How does John 3.16 start?

If you've never heard it before, I'd encourage you to read it. But it starts by saying, The story of Jesus' life concludes with him dying on a Roman cross.

[27:12] And in that moment, he willingly takes upon himself all the rotten and the rebellious stuff that we and me and you and I have all done. In order to take a punishment and a consequence for that moment.

And forgive us of the law. And two, three days later, he rises again and shows his life beyond the grave. That he is the perfect God who came to bring people back to God. And in this moment, he gives us the status, the honor, the freedom that he had.

And he clothes it upon ourselves so that we can become sons with God the Father. This is the big welcome. This is the big invitation of the Christian faith.

And the story of the younger son just represents something of the love and the compassion of God the Father towards you and towards me. But there's also a warning wrapped up in this.

And it comes obviously in the shoes of the older son here. See, the risk for this older son is that he feels like he's got to earn his father's love.

[28:19] There's something of a self-righteousness here wrapped up in the way the older son speaks. Something of an entitlement, I think you might say. See, he doesn't recognize all the things he has got with his father.

He just simply sees the things that he hasn't got. And when someone else gets something that he wishes he had, suddenly his relationship with his dad turns into one of entitlement and one of duty and one of hostility.

See, one of the great risks, I think, for all of us in the room, whether you've been to church or not before, is that we so often think Christianity is about what you must do for God.

Rules, regulations, attending church, reading your Bible, saying your prayers, all things that are helpful in their rightful place, but not enough to bring us back into a perfect relationship with God.

Can I say to you this morning, you do not need to, and you cannot earn your way back to God. You do not need to, because he's done it for you.

[29:25] And you cannot, because the gap is too big. If we see God as a tyrant, as a God who just demands and demands and demands, you've got a wrong picture of God the Father.

I hope you see something of the right picture in this story here. And if you sit there this morning, and there's a part of you who thinks, it's okay, mate, I'm none of those things. I'm actually pretty decent. I follow a lot of the rules. I know what to say at the right time. I reckon when the scales are balanced up, I'll just about tip the scales in my favor. Can I warn you, that's not how it works.

It's not the way God has designed things to be lived. He designed us to be in relationship with him. It's not about rules or regulations. It's about relationship with him.

And so can I encourage you this morning to put yourselves in the shoes of the older son for a moment, and think if that is the way in which you view God, well, see how that conversation ends.

[30:30] It's not one of reconciliation. And if you continue to push God out, a day will come where you have to stand before him and engage in a conversation with him as to the way you treated him, his world, and the people within it.

So that's our story. The older son, the younger son, but I ultimately want you to finish by putting yourself back in your shoes. And I want you to see God for who he is.

See, this is a story, not really of one son in particular. This ultimately is a story of a compassionate father who moves towards people.

He has demonstrated his love for us in the person of Jesus. And this morning he sits there with joy upon his heart when he sees people turn back to him.

Go with me just lastly to, let me get it here. Oh, where's it gone? Oh, I've lost it.

[31:35] My fault. I was going to give you the verse to read with me.

That's always the best thing to do is get people reading the verse. But there's a verse just earlier on. I think it's in Luke chapter 10.

Jesus turns to people and says, when a sinner repents and turns back to God, there is joy and celebration in the kingdom of heaven.

Every single time someone turns back to God, heaven is rocking. And a day will come where this time on earth will finish.

And the invitation to the party is there for us. Can I encourage you this morning, if you have not turned to the Father, and you've not come to your senses, if you've not turned back to receive the

grace and mercy of him, today, please do not leave without doing that.

And if you are following Christ, would this overflow in gratitude and thankfulness for all that he has done for you. God has watched you from afar.

[32:39] He has ran towards you. He has thrown his arms around you and forgiven you of the law. And he celebrates today because you have life with him.

Let me pray. Father God, thank you so much that you are a compassionate Father who moves towards us.

I pray, Father God, today, that you would give us a sense of our sin, a conviction for it. I pray that you would bring us to our senses at times when we need to be.

I pray you help us see you for who you really are. We thank you this morning, Father, that in your grace and mercy, you sent your Son to die in our place, to bring us to new life, and to secure us back into a loving relationship with you that starts today and lasts forever.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.