

The heart idea that I want to communicate today about is the heart of God in the midst of disappointment. I want to start off by telling a little story. This story was written by James Joyce. It's called *Araby*. It takes place in the early 1900s in Dublin, Ireland and is about this boy who begins to have this fascination with his friend's sister. I can probably guess he is about in the eighth grade. The reason why I say that is because I teach Bible at the King's Academy in Sunnyvale with eighth graders, and I'm starting to notice as I have my ear to the street, this is the time kids develop crushes and come into the classroom teasing each other about who likes who.

We don't know the name of this boy. We'll just call him the narrator as it's told in first person. But he has these dreams and fascination with this girl and what it would be like to be in a relationship with her. One day, she approaches him and asks if he's going to be attending what's called *Araby*. *Araby* is a bazaar that churches would put on. It was a popular place, had a lot of activity, something that you needed to experience, and all the proceeds went to local charities.

They were known for the different items that they sold. Now she wasn't able to attend because she was going away on a retreat. So what does any eighth-grade boy think? Well, I got to go and buy something for her, and hopefully, I will capture her affections. So the boy goes to his family. He asked for permission to go, and they said yes. This was going to take place on a Saturday night.

So Saturday night rolls around, and he's waiting for his uncle to come home so he can get some money and go to this place to experience it and buy the girl something. Saturday rolls around. His uncle should be home. Seconds go by. Minutes go by. Half an hour goes by. An hour goes by. Two hours go by. Finally, the uncle shows up and gives him the money. He makes it down to *Araby*, but at his amazement, when he gets there, it's too late. They're already packing up shop and closing it down for the weekend. In a last-ditch effort, he finds someone open and attempts to try to purchase something, only to find out that he doesn't

have enough money. He realizes that this vision and illusion of his fascination with this girl is nothing more than that. The story ends with him essentially crying. It's a really tough, especially for an eighth-grade boy, to go through that level of disappointment.

It's interesting because James Joyce is actually doing something really clever. This is just one story out of 15 in a series called *The Dubliners*. The purpose of the *Dubliners* was to identify and communicate the Irish identity crisis that was occurring at the time. At the time in the early 1900s, people were longing for freedom apart from the influence and rule of the United Kingdom. And so there was this fascination with Irish nationalism and triumphalism and what this freedom would look like.

But cleverly, James Joyce, in all of these stories, talks about characters who have this grandiose vision, but then reality sets in. And when reality sets in, they realize that they can't really do anything about their predicament. They can't do anything about their condition, and it causes a state of paralysis. The theme through all of these 15 stories is this phenomenon of disillusionment. The classic definition of disillusionment is to have a feeling of disappointment resulting from the discovery that something is not as good as one believed it to be. It is to be disenchanted, to be dissatisfied, or defeated in some expectation or hope.

Now this idea of disillusionment is nothing new. Sadly, it's quite more familiar than we would care to acknowledge. On a personal level, for you, it may be starting a new job or entering into a new career. On paper it looks nice. The portfolio looks nice, and there are enough zeros at the end of the salary. You get to meet the culture of where you're working. You love your co-workers. But then, maybe a couple weeks in, or a few months in, or even maybe a few years, there's drama; you end up switching departments. Your work hours started with 40, and now, all of a sudden, you're working 80 to 90 hours, and you start to subtly realize that this vision you had of this new job is not what you thought it would be.

On a global scale, for my Gen Zers, according to the report from The World Economic Forum, as a result of young people facing their second global crisis in a decade and the uncertainty of economic stability, youth are experiencing disillusionment of their future and potential, and even in a relationship with Jesus. The right uncertainty, the right roadblocks, the right trials can cause this phenomenon of disillusionment, which makes one feel lost.

So, as we approach today's text, we can start in verse 11 and just march through the prodigal son. But I would ask for us to step back and ask ourselves, why did Jesus tell these parables in the first place? Because these stories are not just isolated in and of themselves. Jesus actually talks about three parables, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons, but they're in response to a particular audience, to a particular situation. And what I would argue is that he is addressing the attitude or the perception of disillusionment.

It makes sense because, Luke's gospel is the only one to really put down this parable. One of the themes throughout the Gospel of Luke is this idea of how the kingdom of God has brought disillusionment to a lot of people. He starts out in his birth narrative with some really unlikely characters. You have Zachariah and Elizabeth who, as you know, could not have children. In a shame and honor culture, to not be able to have children would have brought shame upon the couple. Yet in spite of all of that, they were the first to hear the good news about the kingdom of God.

Then you have Mary and Joseph. He sneaks in this little detail in chapter two about them at the temple, and they're purchasing pigeons for sacrifice. It doesn't mean much to us today, but at that time, purchasing pigeons meant that you were poor. Yet they were the first to hear about the good news of what God was doing. You have Simeon and then Anna, the prophetess, and you have the shepherds. It's not by accident that they're in this gospel. They were outcasts. They were nobodies. And yet they were the first to hear about the gospel, about the good news of what Jesus was doing in and through the world.

Now, for some, this was great, but for others, this caused disillusionment, especially for the Pharisees, scribes, and the teachers of the law. So you follow this theme all the way until we get to chapter 15. *"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'" (vv. 1-2).* Jesus eats with them. Up until this point, they have been watching Jesus. They've been listening to Jesus. And for this one who is claiming to be the embodiment of the Torah, this one who's claiming to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews, the Son of God, there's work to be done. And yet he is spending all of his time, effort, and energy with sinners, with outcasts. And so the Pharisees were disillusioned and disappointed about what Jesus was here to do. How could this one who claims to be the king hang with the lowly of society?

This attitude is really no different now. If you think back to 1965 and a little rinky dink church in Costa Mesa, California, Chuck Smith has a little congregation. He invited a guy by the name of Lonnie Frisbee into his midst, who was a hippie. Lonnie brings his friends. I don't know if you've seen the movie Jesus Revolution. But on the one side, you got the people who are clean cut, they have suits on, they have cars, they know God, they're church attenders, and on the other side, you have the outcasts, the abandoned, the promiscuous, the adulterers, and the drug addicts. And people were asking Chuck the same question. What are we doing letting these people into our midst? There's work to be done. They were disillusioned, dissatisfied, and disappointed.

So I see what Jesus is doing. What I really want to talk about is three points throughout this parable. What is the cause of our disillusionment? What is the solution to our disillusionment? And how do we actually find our way out of disillusionment? For the Pharisees, they needed their image of how God relates to people to be shattered. They needed to see how sin does not discriminate and causes even the best of us to come into a place of disillusionment.

So, we start with the younger son. It's a very familiar story that you have probably heard since Sunday school. So essentially, the younger brother goes to his father; he wants an early inheritance. He takes the inheritance and sells it. He lives it up, squanders it, and does his thing. The impact of the younger son doesn't really resonate as much with our modern ears, but Kenneth Bailey, who's a New Testament scholar, asked, "When the son asked his father for early advancement for his inheritance, what is he ultimately trying to communicate? What does that say about the son?" And the unanimous answer is that the son wanted his father dead. He did not care about his

father. From extra-biblical evidence, this was not only wrong, but it was downright insulting.

And then, to make matters worse, he not only takes the inheritance but also does what one person should never do, which is to go and sell it. As if it meant nothing and as if his father meant nothing to him. It was the most upright level of disrespect. So ultimately in this action, he tells his dad, "I would rather have your stuff than have you. I'm done pretending." And he went and lived it up and had fun, but that only lasted for a season, and then he found himself in the worst of conditions.

So, what led this young man to his downfall? I would argue that it was the enticement of the illusion that he would find fulfillment and satisfaction apart from his father. But at the end of his pursuit, as we see, as he's literally in a pig slop, he becomes disillusioned. He becomes disappointed. And we see that through scripture, this is a theme that reverberates. It was the enticement that knowledge and wisdom apart from God would lead to life but plunged humanity into death.

It was the illusion that the nation of Israel, if they had kings like all the other nations, would be set apart. And we see the rise of Saul, we see the rise of King David, we see the rise of Solomon, but ultimately, we see their demise that led to the nation of Israel's demise. As one person put it, "What the young son is illustrating, it's the old song that we have seen in our news feeds, of movie stars, of pop stars, and even normal folks, who take their lives. They have everything but yet have no inner peace. Always looking for the next bump, looking for the next look, the next rave, the next website, the next drink, the next dollar amount, the next person, the next experience, the next high, the next accomplishment in order to feel something, but then ending up with nothing.

Jack Higgins, who's the author of several successful novels, *The Eagle Has Landed* being one, was asked a question. "What would you have liked to known as a little kid?" And his answer was, "That when you get to the top, there's nothing there." So, what leads us to become dissatisfied and disillusioned in life? It's pursuing the illusion of fulfillment apart from God, resulting in feeling lost. So I think it's fair as we look upon the younger son, we ask ourselves, not only what am I pursuing, but is what I'm pursuing drawing me closer to the Father's heart or away from it?

Now, typically, when this parable is told, that's the end of it. The younger son has this kumbaya moment and then we kind of just push the older son to the side. But when Jesus is telling this parable, I assume that this is probably only speaking to half the room because the Pharisees are there, and they're like, "Yeah. You don't know Torah, you don't attend synagogue, you don't tithe, you don't fast. Yeah, of course, you're going to wreck your life. Like, what does this have to do with me?"

What happens when you are blind to your own need for grace? So enters in the older son. Meanwhile, the older son is out in the field; he's working, he hears music. He comes over and asks what's going on. Oh, your younger brother came home, and they're throwing a party for him. He gets angry. And he falls into that state of paralysis like we were talking about. His father comes out and he's pleading with him. I don't know how long this lasted, five minutes, thirty minutes; I mean, it's just a story.

Then, the older son says something that really sticks with me. He says, Look, all these years, I've been slaving for you, and I've never disobeyed your orders, and yet you've never even given me a goat. Can a brother get a goat? So I could celebrate with my friends when the son of yours who's squandered your property, literally slapped you in the face, literally sold everything, literally cursed you, and he comes home, and now you want to throw him a party? His father pleads with him some more.

I think it's no accident that when we come to the older son, he's outside working. And according to his own words, he's never deviated. He's never strayed. He's kept everything nice and tidy, kept everything clean. And I realized that the older I get, yes, I relate to the younger son pursuing a life of fulfillment apart from God, and then get disappointed when it doesn't work out. But I realized the more I'm getting older, I actually relate to this older son as well. He's followed all the rules. As his father was looking for the young son, when he came home, you also saw the father looking for the older son, which indicates to me that the older son was also lost.

He finds the older son, but something happens to him when he sees his dad embrace his younger brother. My second point with this is that this older brother had also become disillusioned, disappointed, and dissatisfied. But what was the difference? He became

disillusioned when he was confronted with the fragility of his religion.

What do I mean by that? I think the older brother demonstrates what it looks like to outwardly conform, to fulfill our duties, to show up and do what we should do, but to internally be dissatisfied. In comparison to the younger son who just blatantly rejected his father, the older son's attitude is a little more insidious. He's more tolerating his father in the hopes that he will get something from him.

Religion tends to always reduce God to a formula to make him feel obligated to bless you. It turns life into a formula. If I marry the right person, if I go to the right school, if I make sure my kids are in the right programs, then God has to deliver. But as we know, not everything works out the way we intended. The older son has done everything right, but he doesn't get acknowledged. And so he falls into this place of disillusionment. Sin is cunning because it causes us to pursue a life apart from him or to use God for our own means.

So what's the solution? What's the answer? How do we get out of this place of disappointment? The answer is in the parable. Both of these sons are in different positions, but they need one common solution. They're both faced with disillusionment in their own different way.

For the younger son, he had two options. He could continue his downward spiral. He went from royalty to eating with pigs. And to put this in perspective, this is like a triple shame. He's eating with pigs, he's sold out to Gentiles, and he's ceremonially unclean. So, in a Jewish mind, this son is unredeemable. He's at the bottom of the bottom. And he has an option. He can continue to try to do things his own way.

Examples of this now would be when we see people, in times when things get hard, and they're faced with the disillusionment of their own decisions, continue to walk away from the faith, walk away from the church, and deconstruct their faith. Another reason, and I call this more of a self-atonement, is that they get caught in a cycle. I've done so much bad that I have to do so much good just to make myself feel good about myself. They are numbing in order just to get through the day.

But the younger son had a second option.

**“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and 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 went to his father. vv. 17-20**

Robert Robinson was a man who was saved out of a life of sin by George Whitfield's ministry. Immediately after, he penned, I think, one of the greatest hymns, Come Now Fount of Every Blessing. It's interesting because a little bit later, he wanders, becomes like this prodigal son, and journeys into carnality. He was on a stagecoach one day with this woman, and she was reading something in her book. She came across this verse and she decided to share it with him. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." And Mr. Robinson began to burst in tears. He says, "Madam, I am that poor, unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago. And I would give a thousand worlds if I could enjoy the feelings I had then." And although surprised, she reassured him that those streams of mercy mentioned in this song still flowed for him. He returned his heart to the Lord and was restored to fellowship.

The older brother had a similar option. He had two ways he could go about it. He could continue in his shattered perception of reality. It's a humbling thing to recognize that under the guise of my religion, I have a heart that was really bent on wanting things from God, and it was really never about God in the first place. It's painful to recognize that in my best efforts, I still fall short. He could continue with this grumbling attitude, or he could also share in his father's compassion and love for him.

Oswald Chambers talks about how God can use disillusionment and disappointment for our good. He says disillusionment means having no more misconceptions and false impressions and false judgments in life. It means being free from these deceptions. However, though no longer deceived, our experience of disillusionment may actually leave us cynical and overly critical in our judgment of others. But the disillusionment that comes from God brings us to the point where we see people as they really are, yet without any cynicism or stinging bitter criticism.

Many of the things in life that inflict the greatest injury, grief, or pain stem from the fact that we suffer from illusions. So, I believe that God can use these disappointments and these disillusionments to bear the fact of reality upon us and invite us into his mercy and compassion.

So, how is this practically done? How do we actually find our way out of this? A. W. Tozer, as you guys probably know, famously says that what comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing to you. And it seems to me one of the hardest hurdles and challenges is revisiting this idea of what really drives Jesus to do the things that he does. Because in the midst of following Jesus, we can be weighed down by our sins. We can become discouraged when we face disappointment and life can honestly leave a lot of scars. And it puts us in that perspective of disillusionment. Quite honestly, it's a fog that's hard to get out of.

But have you ever wondered what actually fuels Jesus to do the things that he does? Why did he come to save? And I think the answer is right in front of us all throughout these three parables. Jesus is putting the heart of God on full display. If a shepherd loses a sheep, is he not obligated to go find the sheep? But when he finds it, does he spank it? Does he put a shock collar on it? No, he rejoices. He lives for it.

The same thing with the woman who lost the coin. She searched everywhere until she found that coin. And when she finds it, she doesn't throw her hands up and says, "Man, I hope this never happens again." No, she rejoices. And does not a father long for a relationship with his sons and a relationship with his kids, no matter where they find themselves?

This is describing the compassion of God, which is not sentimentalism. It describes the inner parts of who Jesus is. Dane C. Ortlund puts it this way. "The yearning heart of God delivers and redelivers sinners who find themselves drowning in the sewage of their life...in need of rescue that they cannot even begin on their own, let alone complete."

Who do you perceive him to be in your sin and your suffering? Who do you think God is, not just on paper, but in the kind of person you believe is hearing you when you pray? How does he feel about you? His saving of us is not cool and calculating; it is a matter of yearning. Not the you that you project to everyone around you and not the you that you wish you were. He's yearning for the real you, the you underneath everything you represent to others. Have you considered

that your sins evoke the compassion of Jesus towards you and not away from you? Hebrews says he lives to make intercession for the saints.

So, how do we get ourselves out of disillusionment? We have to connect the compassion of God to our greatest need. What are you in need of this morning? Because we see that the younger son comes to his father broken, dirty, lost, hurt, and disillusioned. He thought that life apart from his father would lead to life, but he was rather disappointed. Yet we see the father tenderly embracing him.

But the older son, the father actually approaches him later in nakedness and in vulnerability because all of his vain attempts of hiding behind his religion are exposed. The older brother also finds himself disillusioned. The story ends with a cliffhanger. We never know if the older son really responds. We don't know if he ever goes into the party. And I think it's done intentionally. Will those who find themselves in a disillusioned state, confused, hurt, and broken, continue to downward spiral or respond to the compassion and the mercy of God?

This is the beauty of the Advent season. Retelling the story that we serve a God who is not distant but who came to us to save us from our sins.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you. We reflect on the glorious riches of your word. They hold so much relevance, and in them, we encounter a Savior who loves us. One who is full of compassion and mercy. Lord, we know our tendency to wander, our tendency to fall off the path. And it's in that moment where we feel like you've left us and no longer want us. But through your word we are reassured that your mercies are new every morning and that you long to be with us. We thank you for that, Lord, and we praise you in Christ's name. Amen.