

SERMON NOTES
Luke 15:11-24
“Grace to Recover from Failure & Shame”

Intro:

- This is my last sermon before retiring the end of September
- *You might call it a legacy sermon*
- As I've reflected on how my ministry has influenced Cornerstone's church culture, I've come to this realization:
- *The greatest influence of my ministry has NOT come from any of my successes in life – but rather, from my greatest failure*
- That in itself is an interesting observation – and perhaps a reason for hope for some of you who have experienced failure

- *Cornerstone is a grace-filled church and was before I came -- or else I never would have been called to be pastor here*
- *But that culture of grace has been shaped and strengthened as a result of my story of experiencing God's grace in 1994 after a major failure*

- What is God like in relation to us when we have failed or behaved badly?
- *Nowhere does Jesus teach us more clearly about the Father's heart than in the Parable of the Prodigal Son*

I. JOURNEY INTO BROKENNESS AND SHAME

- In Jesus' story, the younger son prematurely asked his father for his portion of the inheritance (*one-third // two-thirds going to the first-born*)
- For a son to ask his father for his inheritance money was unthinkable - *it was tantamount to saying: “I'm tired of waiting for you to die, Dad, so can I just have my money now so I don't have to hang around here any longer?”*

- The Father let him go – without anger
- *The father gave the younger son the freedom to fail and to suffer painful consequences*

Luke 15:13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

- *What Jesus describes as the far country is a condition of the soul – and many of us have spent at least some time there*
- -the land of self-willed independence - running our own life as we see fit
- *Wanting to be his own master, he ended up as the lowest of slaves, hungering for pig food in a pig pen filled with mud and excrement and filth*
- Jesus is teaching that rebelling against God's authority is a self-defeating act of folly that ultimately leads to brokenness and misery and shame
- Shame.
- We've all felt it – but what is it – and how does it differ from guilt?
- *“Unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong, shame is the feeling of being something wrong.”*
- Guilt is the feeling that I failed // shame is the feeling that I am a failure
- *Shame is the sense that I am inherently defective and worthless*
- Shame is the sense that if others knew the real me, they would reject me
- *That sense of being deeply flawed – defective – worthless – unclean – unlovable – can result from being sinned against – being abused or molested – being cheated on by a husband or wife – being bullied ---*
- *You can feel shame for being poor // or for having a parent in prison // or for having a parent – or a child – who is an alcoholic or drug addict*
- But there is also a shame that extends from sin and guilt
- *The shame that results from having an abortion // or committing adultery // or abusing a spouse – or child // or getting divorced for the second time // or getting arrested for a DUI // or getting pregnant out of wedlock for the third time // or gambling away your family's savings // or losing your job because of a drug addiction // or filing for bankruptcy*
- The Good News is that Jesus heals shame – all different kinds of shame
- Here's the story of my journey into brokenness and shame -- and then how Jesus healed my greatest shame:

- *For the first 15 years of our married life, Beth and I lived frugally on a modest income – trusting our heavenly Father to provide our needs – which He did unfailingly -- and we lived free of the love of money and free of debt*
- *I would have considered financial stewardship and freedom from the love of money to be a strength of ours*
- But an unguarded strength can become a double weakness
- In 1986 – Beth and I received a windfall – a \$5,000 inheritance from Beth’s Grandma
- *We had never had a surplus of money before – what would we do with it?*
- We decided to give some to the church and missions and put the rest in a CD in a bank
- Then I heard an ad on our local radio for an investment opportunity in a start-up tire recycling company in a neighboring town
- *I bought 200 shares of Rubber Research at \$3 / share*
- Within a month the price soared to \$9
- *I invested some more money and the price soared to \$18 and split 3 for 1*
- *I began to think that THIS was how I would be able to put my girls through college*
- And then I bought some other stocks on credit – and on margin -- without Beth’s knowledge
- *Yes, I know – foolish and wrong on so many levels – the start of the journey to the pig pen*
- Then Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 and the stock market plunged overnight – and my stocks plummeted in value – *and I started getting margin calls – and my paper profits had become huge losses*
- My indebtedness was now greater than my annual income
- Meanwhile, we moved to Tracy, CA, in 1991 to pastor a church there
- *I let some of the leaders there know of our financial situation before taking the job*
- I was deeply sorry for the mess I had gotten us into – shedding many tears – *and then I turned right around and bought more stocks on credit*
- I think they call that the definition of insanity: keep doing what you’ve been doing while hoping for different results

- Finally, in January of 1994, God told me to stop
- *But Lord, how will I pay back my debts if I stop?*
- Enough of this! Stop! Sell all your stocks and get out of the market!
- *So I did*
- I met with a Christian financial counselor to see if we could develop a plan to avoid bankruptcy
- *I remember him asking me: "So how much is your total indebtedness?"*
- I didn't even know – because I didn't want to know – I was so ashamed of my debt problem that I couldn't even face facts – and when I finally did – it was many thousands of dollars worse than I thought
- *My Christian financial counselor advised me to see a bankruptcy lawyer*
- Bankruptcy violates my Christian convictions
- *I filed for bankruptcy on April 28 only because I had no choice*
- When you make bad choice after bad choice after bad choice for several years, there are no good choices left
- Appearing in that courthouse to file for bankruptcy was one of the most humiliating experiences of my life
- Facing the judge was hard – but not nearly as hard as my next task: *confessing my sins and failures and the bankruptcy to my girls*
- Every dad wants to be a hero to his daughters
- *Dads are supposed to be strong – and wise – and provide for their families – and protect their families – and take care of their families*
- And Dads who are Christian leaders or pastors are supposed to be godly examples for their children
- *But I had betrayed the trust of my wife and had utterly failed my daughters both as a provider and as a godly example*
- I was ashamed of the man I had become
- *The girls assured me that they still loved me – but admitted they were somewhat fearful of what would happen to us as a family in the future*
- And it was about to get worse than I even imagined
- The Deacons and I agreed that I needed to make a full disclosure to the congregation
- *The date set was May 8*
- May 8 was Mother's Day that year – and May 8 is also my birthday

- My announcement to the congregation began with these words: *“It has been said that ‘sin will take you farther than you want to go. Sin will keep you longer that you want to stay. And sin will cost you more than you want to pay.’ I am experiencing the painful truth of that statement.”*
- I disclosed my bankruptcy and continued: *“The process of recovery includes steps of repentance such as admitting my powerlessness, surrendering my life anew to God’s care, making a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself, and also admitting to God, to myself, and to others the exact nature of my wrongs.*
- This is a very painful process. Nearly every day I learn new bad things about myself. Nearly every day I learn more ways that I have hurt others by my actions. Nearly every day I see new ways in which I have brought shame upon my wife, my children, my ministry, my church, and my profession.”
- *“I have taught and preached and counseled and administered the grace of God on hundreds of occasions. But I am discovering how difficult it is to accept and trust the grace of God in the midst of a major failure. It is hard right now to see myself as anything other than a bankrupt wretch.”*
- That was May 8, 1994
- *Calls for my resignation started on May 9*
- I was placed on administrative leave on May 11
- *Under intense pressure, I submitted my letter of resignation on May 16*
- Some of the leaders in the church made it clear that not only were we not welcome to attend the church any more – but it would be best if we would leave town altogether
- *And one of the leaders – who was friends with some denominational executives – said that he would do everything in his power to make sure that I would never pastor another church again*
- Well on my way to the pig pen: Bankrupt. Jobless. Churchless. Soon to be homeless.
- With no money, no job, and no prospects of a job, we had nowhere to turn but to Beth’s parents.
- Can you imagine the humiliation of being a 42-year-old man needing to ask your in-laws to rescue you and your family from homelessness?

- *Beth's parents were very gracious and generous. They never disrespected me nor held my failures against me.*
- And so the five of us moved into the same house where Beth had been raised since she was two years old (near Duck Creek Park).
- And then there was our 20th wedding anniversary: August 17, 1994
- *This was not the year for a memorable or expensive anniversary celebration, but to make matters worse, I got sick that day – and so we didn't even go to McDonalds that night – Our anniversary dinner was fish sticks at home*
- Beth hates fish sticks
- *It was kind of like eating pig food in the far country*
- I felt like a terrible failure as a husband as well as a failure as a father and pastor
- *The hardest thing for Beth – even harder than the humiliation of the bankruptcy and resignation and moving in with her parents – the hardest thing was this haunting question: “Who is this man I've been married to for 20 years? I thought I knew him. I thought I knew his character. But who is this man who betrayed my trust – and made such unwise choices – and brought our family to this place of misery and ruin and shame? And what else don't I know about him?”*
- Did Beth get angry? Of course she did
- *Did she struggle for a while in forgiving me? Of course*
- Did it take a few months for our marriage to fully heal? Of course
- *We were in the midst of the poorer part of “for richer or for poorer” and the worse part of “for better or for worse”*
- But we both meant what we said 20 years ago – and there was never any talk of separation or divorce at any time
- And just as importantly – Beth continued to treat me with respect in front of our daughters and in front of her parents
- *I would have been an easy target for a steady barrage of disparaging insults – but there was none of that*
- I was consistently treated with more kindness and respect than I deserved – by Beth and her parents

- People today look at our family and our daughters and their husbands and our 16 grandchildren – and people think that Beth and I must have done everything right
- *Beth for the most part – YES*
- Me? I did some things right – but also failed big time in this situation
- But here’s the good news – and the reason why there is hope for failures – hope for anyone in any kind of pig pen – hope for anyone dealing with any kind of shame
- *Jesus heals our shame – and there is always a path to a new life of blessing*

II. JOURNEY BACK TO THE FATHER

- Isn’t it amazing how much misery some people will endure before admitting: *“I was wrong. I need to change. I need help. I need God.”*
- Yet God has created deep within our soul an incurable homesickness for the Father - a hunger for God and His love that nothing in this world can satisfy
- *When the prodigal son had lost all his wealth and all his friends and all his self-respect, he finally recognized his need of his father and went back home*

Luke 15:17-20 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father.

- The turning point: *“When he came to his senses” = “When he came to himself”—he went home*
- That’s what the Bible means by repentance - *leaving the far country of the soul’s rebellion and returning to God in humility and surrender*
- I am here by God’s grace to testify that even from a wilderness outpost deep in the far country, there is a way back home

- *It is the way of repentance, the way of the Father's forgiving love, the way of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ*
- Jesus' whole purpose in coming from heaven to earth was to rescue us from sin, death and hell – and bring us back home to the Father
- He accomplished that mission by becoming one of us – descending into the pig pen with us – *The Righteous One sharing life in this fallen world with the unrighteous* – then dying for our sins on the Cross and rising from the dead to conquer death and set us free to live a whole new life
- *The path back to the Father begins with....*

Repentance

- For some people, repentance sounds like a judgmental word – a harsh word – *a word to run away from*
- On the contrary, repentance is the path to healing – repentance is the way back to the Father – and to our true identity in Christ
- *When he came to his senses – he realized that his life had become unmanageable ... and that he was powerless to fix his desperate situation ... and he confessed his sins ... and he arose out of the pig pen and came home to his father*
- *The healing of shame begins with facing the truth about our sin and ourselves.*
- My failure forced me to acknowledge and face the truth about my dark side
- I denied it at first – I kept saying: *I don't know how this happened – it's so out of character for me – I just made some financial mistakes and was taken advantage of by my stock broker*
- *But then the Holy Spirit revealed to me the sins that led to those poor financial choices: envy / worry / greed*
- *And when walking in the flesh rather than in the Spirit – I was quite capable of being deceitful // weak in faith // impulsive*
- Our sins proceed from our character flaws – and confessing our sins without dealing with our character flaws is like snipping off the stems of weeds rather than digging them out by the root
- We all have a dark side

- *If we do not face the truth about our dark side – and guard against it -- we are vulnerable to being blindsided by it*
 - I tried half-measures and half-repentance and superficial confession
 - *God wouldn't let me get away with that*
- Where once I prayed persistently for God to rescue me from my troubles – sorry for the mess I was in – but not mourning my sin – finally I actually repented and *began to pray fervently for God to do whatever it took to create in me a clean and pure heart*
 - *I craved righteousness as if my life depended on it*
 - I learned the hard way what every recovering alcoholic who is working the 12 Steps knows: *The starting point for spiritual victory is admitting defeat*
 - The starting point for spiritual power is admitting powerlessness
 - *--the starting point for experiencing spiritual fullness is admitting emptiness*
 - *--the starting point for experiencing wholeness is admitting brokenness*
 - *A paradox of spiritual victory is that we must give up in order to win*
- By clinging to control of our lives, our lives spin more and more out of control
 - *The healing of shame begins with surrendering control of our lives to God*
 - *When we surrender our lives to God, we surrender the mess that is rather than the respectability that we wish for.*
- *I knew I had made a mess of things by taking matters into my own hands*
 - I knew I needed to surrender my life to God and let Him take control and trust Him to provide for the needs of my family
 - *--but first I wanted to clean up my mess myself*
- But healing from shame began with turning my life over to God while it was still a mess – a hopeless and embarrassing mess
 - *This process of repentance and recovery was extremely painful for me – but what I discovered was...*
 - *After great pain, a new life emerges: the more complete the death and burial of the old, the more fruitful the new life that emerges.*

- Here is a key spiritual truth that seems contrary to our instincts: *The path to the healing of shame is by way of humility and sometimes even greater humiliation rather than the path of guarding our dignity or saving our pride*
- There is no saving face in the process of spiritual brokenness
- *God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*
- He gives grace to the humble
- *God's grace is greater than all our sin and failure – not only to forgive, but also to cleanse, restore and redeem.*
- *This is illustrated by the hero of Jesus' story: the grace-filled Father*

III. GRACE: THE POWER TO HEAL SHAME

Luke 15:20-24 But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

- While the son was still a long way from home, the father saw him and was filled with....
- *-with what? - Anger? Disappointment? Disgust?*
- His father saw him and was filled with compassion for him
- Broken, wounded, weary, defeated, ashamed – filthy -- came the son
- *-and the father responded to his son's brokenness with compassion and unrestrained joy and delight*
- The father ran to his son, threw his arms around his filthy body and kissed his dirty face
- The prodigal son then proceeded with his well-rehearsed confession of sin:
- *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*
- But before the son could say: "Make me like one of your hired men," the father interrupted him and said to his servants: *Let's have a feast and*

celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

- When God the Father forgives us and accepts us into His family, He never brings up our past sins to shame us
- In Jesus' story, there were no words such as *"I told you so"* or *"Look what you've cost me"* or *"Do you realize the agony you've put me through"*
- No such words – just forgiveness conveyed by an accepting embrace
- The son's repentance met with the Father's grace

- *The healing of shame requires repentance to be accompanied by... Grace... lots of it*

- Was May 8, 1994 the worst day of my life – or one of the best days of my life?
- *It sure felt like the worst – confessing my sins and failures to the congregation that Sunday morning*
- But being that it was still Mother's Day and my birthday – Beth and I both received some gifts on that somber day
- *The gift I received from my daughters would eventually change my life – and has impacted many of yours over the years right up to this very day*

- I had told my daughters earlier that week that I would be announcing my bankruptcy to the church on that Sunday
- *That weekend my girls had gone to a Christian youth conference – and knowing my story – and knowing the Gospel – there they purchased my birthday present*

- It was a t-shirt
- I read the words – and started to sob

SHOW SLIDE

- I AM DEEPLY LOVED, FULLY FORGIVEN, PLEASING, ACCEPTED AND COMPLETE IN CHRIST... BECAUSE OF THE CROSS

- *I didn't feel that way that day – and in fact, did not feel worthy to wear that t-shirt for several weeks*

STOP SHOWING SLIDE

- It's one thing to affirm that we are accepted by God through faith in Jesus Christ when our reliance upon God's grace is supported by our good works and personal uprightness and spiritual commitment and ministry successes
- *It's quite another thing to approach God when all of your own supports have been kicked out from under you, and you have nothing to cling to except Jesus and His blood and righteousness*
- It is then that you learn whether your reliance is truly and solely upon what Christ has done for you – *or partially upon what you have been doing for Christ*

- After several weeks of not being able to wear that t-shirt, God spoke to me, saying: *Scott, do you believe the Gospel or not? Is your acceptability before Me based on the Cross – or your own spiritual successes?*
- *I came to understand at a heart level – that at the moments of our greatest spiritual successes and our deepest failures alike – it is always and only because of the Cross that we are acceptable to God*
- And my shame began to heal as I believed and embraced the grace of God in Jesus Christ at a heart level

- *And I am here to testify that God's grace is indeed greater than all our sins and failure – and is able to heal our shame*

- Shame is based on the lie that our identity and worth are determined by the shameful things we did – or the shameful things that were done to us
- Healing from shame – freedom from shame – is based on the truth of the Gospel that my identity and worth are based on what God says about me:
- *I am totally accepted, fully pleasing, deeply loved, completely forgiven and empowered to live a new life in Christ – because of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus*

- Grace is the beginning of our healing of shame because it offers the one thing we need most: *to be accepted before we become acceptable*
- *Grace heals our shame as we are embraced as a son by the heavenly Father when we deserve to be treated as an unworthy servant at best*

- 1995 Annual Report

- “A year ago we were in the process of losing nearly everything: jobs, ministry, church family, friends, home, car, reputation, hopes and dreams. Today nearly everything we lost has been restored to us – often, better than ever. A year ago it seemed that nearly every day some new bad thing would happen. *Today I am amazed at God’s mercies and compassions which are new every morning. A year ago the future seemed like a black hole. Today I am rejoicing in God’s plans to give us a hope-filled future. A year ago life seemed like a series of deaths. Today life seems like a series of rebirths and resurrections unto newness of life.*
- “A second chance. A new beginning. In these last 12 months I have experienced the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus more deeply than ever before in my life. *First the Cross with its power to forgive, to cleanse, to put to death the old, to bury our failures.* Then the resurrection with its power to restore, to make new, to give life, to give hope, to give joy.”

Conclusion:

Jeanette Clift George:

“On a short flight from Tucson to Phoenix, as I got on, I noticed a young woman with her baby. They were both dressed in white pinafores. *The mother was smiling, and the little baby was saying "Dada, Dada." And the little baby was darling.* She wore a little pink bow where there would probably be hair pretty soon, and it was just darling. And they sat down opposite me. *Every time anybody went by, the baby would say, "Dada, Dada." The young mother said they were going home, and Daddy was waiting for them.*

Everybody was so happy, and we all enjoyed the little baby. The mother had a little Thermos with orange juice in it. She kept feeding the baby, a little fruit and then a little juice. *It was a rough flight. Every time the baby cried the mother fed her a little bit more orange juice and a little more fruit.*

I don't know how to get out of this story without telling you the truth. The flight was very turbulent. (The flight was so rough that the attendants had to stay seated.) *All of the fruit that had gone down came up. I think more came up than had gone down; I think there was more up than there was baby, and it was startling; the carpet was not in good condition. It was a mess.*

Those of us on the opposite side of the aisle were not in good condition at all. We kept trying to tell the young mother it was just fine. We were handing her tissues and things. It was a very loving time, but a mess. *The baby was crying, and she looked awful. We couldn't cry, but we looked awful. The mother was so sorry about it.*

We landed. The minute we landed, baby was fine: "Dada, Dada." The rest of us were just awful. We began to get off the plane, and we all moved very carefully.

"I had on a suit, and I was trying to decide whether to burn it or just cut off the sleeve. *Have you ever tried to get away from something really unpleasant -- and it was you? Well that's the way we were. It was really bad.*

I looked out of the plane, and there waiting was the young man who had to be Daddy: white slacks, white shirt, white flowers, and a little green paper. I thought, I know what's going to happen. He's going to run to that baby who now looks awful--I mean the hair and the pinafore were dreadful. *He's going to run to that baby, get one look, and keep on running, saying, "Not my kid!"*

As he ran to the young mother, I wouldn't say she threw the baby at him, *but she did kind of leave quickly to go get cleaned up.*

--He picked up that baby, and I watched him as he hugged that baby and kissed that baby and stroked that baby's hair. He said, *"Daddy's baby's come home. Daddy's baby's come home."*

I watched them all the way to the luggage claim area. He never stopped kissing that baby. He never stopped welcoming that baby back home. I thought, *Where did I ever get the idea that my Father God is less loving than a young daddy in white slacks and white shirt?*

- *How about you? Is it time for you to come home to a Father who loves you?*
- There may be some people here this morning who have made a mess of your life
- Maybe it's a big mess – maybe it's a little mess
- *Don't wait to come home to God until you first clean up your own mess*
- No matter how dirty you may be with the grime of sin, He will embrace you with His love and forgiveness

- *Come to Jesus just as you are and let Him clean up your mess and give you a whole new life and a new identity and a new purpose and destiny*
- The Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection offers hope of a clean slate, a fresh start, and the power to begin a new life after failures and mistakes and sin

- BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS: If you trust Jesus to save you from your sins – then you can say this with confidence: *I am totally accepted, fully*

pleasing, deeply loved, completely forgiven and empowered to live a new life in Christ – because of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus

Salvation Prayer // Altar Call // “Come As You Are”