

Two Lost Sons
Luke 15:11-32
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Introduction

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest and professor at Harvard who left his teaching position in his early 50's to work at a home for mentally handicapped adults. As he was making his transition, he spent some time at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg studying Rembrandt's masterful painting "Return of the Prodigal Son," which shows the scene of the barefoot, exhausted prodigal son being embraced by his father while his older brother looks sternly at the two of them from the side. Henri spent many hours examining the details and finding new insights. In his book, also called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he says that the painting "revealed to me the deepest yearnings of my heart."¹ He talks about how at first he identified with the younger son in the parable because he had wandered far and wide in his early life, been part of many movements, but was tired and wanted to be home and welcomed by a father's loving embrace. But then a friend suggested that perhaps he was more like the older brother, and he realized there was a lot of truth in that since he had always followed the rules, never wasted time and money in sensual pursuits, and felt a fair amount of self-righteousness and resentment towards others. Eventually, another friend suggested one other possibility: "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father... who can claim for himself the authority of true compassion." He said the words struck him like a thunderbolt because he saw the truth in them.

Today we turn to one of the most famous and familiar of all of Jesus' parables. And we, like Henri Nouwen, will see ourselves in the characters in different ways. As we work through the cultural background that is not immediately apparent in the text, we'll see new layers to the story as well. And ultimately, we'll get a greater picture of our Father God who reaches out with compassion to both the disobedient and wasteful son as well as the obedient but unloving son.

I have chosen to preach this parable by itself, without the other two parables that come right before it in Luke 15. It made sense to me because there's plenty of material to preach through in these 22 verses, but I risk cutting off this story from its context. Specifically, at the beginning of the chapter, Luke had noted that, "*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'*" (vv. 1-2). If you don't understand that context, you don't understand this parable or the two that came right before it, both about someone pursuing lost things, a lost sheep and a lost coin. Jesus was directing these parables to the Pharisees' attitudes of indignation towards the dirty, rotten sinners whom Jesus seemed to love just a little bit too much. Jesus wanted to share why He received them and ate with them – it's because He was demonstrating the Father's heart towards the lost.

Our first six verses focus on the actions of

I. The Younger Son/Sin and Its Consequences (vv. 11-16)

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything,

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Image, 1994), p. 6.

a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

I don't know what you think about when you read that the younger son asked his father for his inheritance early. By the property laws of the time, the older son was entitled to 2/3rds of the estate and the younger son to 1/3 of the estate after their father's death. Maybe you think, "Hmm, asking for the inheritance early is a little selfish, but it was coming to him eventually, so why not?" It's hard for us today to understand how insulting this son has been. He was essentially wishing that his father was dead. The boy was lost to his father well before he actually left the house; he despised his old man and wanted out from under his authority. He did not love his father for who he was, only for what he gave him. That is the height of ingratitude and disrespect. Kenneth Bailey, who has studied Middle Eastern cultures to understand Jesus' parables better, said that in response to the boy's request for his inheritance, "If the father is a traditional Middle Eastern father, he will strike the boy across the face and drive him out of the house."²

But this father did not do that. He not only let him have his early inheritance, but he allowed him to sell it off. That phrase in verse 13 "*gathered all he had*" is a financial term that means that he liquidated everything, turned it into cash.³ Which meant that he sold off his third of the family farm and properties, shaming the family among the community. Because he sold everything in a few days, he probably had to settle for less than it was worth. But he didn't care, he just had to get away. And then he spent what he had inherited, Jesus used the words "squandered" and "reckless." You can fill in the blank with all manner of wild, sinful indulgences; his brother certainly assumed that he spent his money on prostitutes. The young man had left home to find adventure and freedom, but eventually found himself at the bottom of the barrel, hiring himself out in servitude in miserable conditions. Not only was he in Gentile territory, but he was working with pigs; that's a double-insult for a Jewish man. His search for freedom led to bondage, as it always does eventually.

Where were his friends when all of this happened? Did he spend a couple months couch-surfing as all those friends he had partied with saw his plight and helped him out? No, the "friends" were nowhere to be found. I had a roommate my first semester of college whose name was Chad. He moved out of my room next door so that he could room with a guy who was really into the party scene, since he realized I wasn't that guy. A mutual friend of ours told me how things were going for Chad right before he flunked out of school: the friend said that Chad would pay for all of the parties that he went to; he would rent hotel rooms, buy the booze, pay for everything; he bought his friends. But the people he partied with didn't really like him; they just used him for his money, but they actually despised him. I can only guess there was a similar situation going on for the prodigal son whose friends deserted him when he bottomed out.

I have heard the pain in the voices of parents whose children have left the faith and have wandered in far countries living wildly and leaving the values they grew up with far behind. If that is you, please take hope in the fact that their story is not over yet, that the Lord is not done with them. I have heard many testimonies of former prodigals that the Lord brought back after many years away. Sometimes they have to bottom out like this son did, sometimes they have to experience the futility in that lifestyle for themselves. Keep praying for them, keep reaching out to them; you never know what the Lord might do in their lives.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, "The Pursuing Father" from *Christianity Today's* October 26, 1998 issue, p. 35.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 130.

Now if Jesus had stopped at verse 16, the original audience would have said, "Great story! That horrible, wretched young man got exactly what he deserved. He's lower than a pig, rolling around in the mud where he belongs. Thanks for telling us this story to warn anyone who listens what happens to kids who disrespect their parents so greatly."⁴ But, of course, Jesus did not end the parable there. He did not leave this dirty sinner in the mud, He brought him home. The next eight verses focus on

II. The Father/Repentance and Restoration (vv. 17-24)

¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

"When he came to himself." The prodigal has hit rock-bottom and finally realized where his terrible decisions have brought him. He had tried to work his way out of his desperate circumstances, but that hadn't worked. He knew that his only hope was to go home, but that if he went back to his village that he would face a community that did not want him, that would be very angry at him. He probably still smelled like pigs, wore tattered clothes, and looked emaciated and starving. He knew that he could not hope to be taken back as a son after how he had treated his father; he had lost that right. The best he could hope for, if his father would take him back at all, would be to be hired as a servant. At least then he could eat and survive.

Now, half of the commentators I read said that the boy's confession in verse 18 "*I have sinned against heaven and against you*" was so great because it didn't make any excuse for his sin or blame it on anyone else. He just took the blame and acknowledged that he had sinned against both God and his father. The other half of the commentators said, "Oh no, that's not a real confession. The boy was trying to figure out how to go back home and say and do enough so that his father would let him stay there and work until he could pay back all the money that he had burned through." I lean towards the second one, but either way, the son has come to the end of himself and his solution was to go to the father. Whether it was from pure, humble motives, or a more manipulative angle, it's hard to tell. But at this point, it's not so much about the son as the father.

A father in that culture did not run. Not only did robes make running difficult, but an important landowning patriarch like that would have been too dignified to run. But as soon as the father saw his lost son, he ran, both because he felt compassion and joy in seeing his son, but also to protect him from any harm that the villagers might have met his son with. The neighbors knew exactly how poorly the son had treated his family, how much shame he had caused them, and they would have looked to make the son feel the brunt of their scorn. The father allowed himself to be humiliated and undignified so that his son would not be; he took on his shame. Think about that: not only did the father not attack the son and take out his anger on him, but he also did not allow anyone else to. He ran to accept him in his love and forgiveness before anyone else could condemn him.

⁴ Gary Inrig, *The Parables: Understanding What Jesus Meant* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1991), pp. 17-18.

The father kissed and embraced his son, which means that he did not offer his love as a response to a confession or apology; he gave it before that. The son had composed a speech on the way home, but he didn't even get to finish it when his father cut him off. He didn't actually say anything to his son, he just started giving directions to his servants to clothe him and prepare a feast to celebrate his return. A robe, a ring, shoes, a fattened calf – these are all things that showed honor to the son who deserved nothing but dishonor. This son had wasted one-third of his family's possessions, but rather than fixating on what was lost the father heaped even more on his son to welcome him home.

What a picture of God's extravagant grace! He does not wait for us to clean ourselves up, but He runs down the road to embrace us. His lavish grace and forgiveness come before our repentance – His kindness leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). We have earned the status of an outcast and our repentance is often weak and insincere, but God covers our shame and keeps us from condemnation. He does not make us servants, He accepts us as sons and daughters. He restores us even when we have not earned it. If we think that we have to repay Him by earning back what we have lost, He says, "No, that's impossible." We bring only our great need, empty hands, empty pockets, and weary souls. God takes us who were spiritually dead and makes us alive in Christ. He throws a feast for us and gives us a position in the family where we will live and reign with Him.

What an amazing story about the heart of God. But it's not over; it gets deeper and more complex with the last main character. After all, Jesus began by saying, "*There was a man who had two sons.*"

III. The Older Son/Resentment and Self-Justification (vv. 25-32)

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

When the sheep was found in verse 5, the shepherd called his friends and neighbors together and they all rejoiced. When the coin was found in verse 9, the woman called her friends and neighbors together and they all rejoiced. The angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner is found. Now the lost son has returned and the father has invited his friends and neighbors for a huge feast with music and dancing. Everyone in all of these stories is so excited for the lost to be found. Except one person, the older brother. He is bitter and unwilling to welcome his brother home because he is so angry at never having gotten his own party. The older brother would have been expected to support his father and help him in the midst of all this activity, but instead he finds his own way to insult his father. He would rather be angry about his father forgiving his brother than come in and join in the party. And think about it: if the younger brother had spent his entire inheritance, then whose money is paying for this lavish party? It's the older brother's eventual inheritance paying for all of this.⁵ This party is costing him in more ways than one.

The younger brother returned from his wandering years and said that he was willing to be a slave. The older son said, essentially, "I have been a slave all along." He hadn't really been a slave; everything that the father owned was his. He chose to see himself as a slave rather than a son. His

⁵ Ryken, p. 156.

father reminded him that he had always shared everything he owned with him. But he doesn't apologize for loving and celebrating the return of his other son. The father could have greatly rebuked the older son after his insulting behavior and words. Again, we don't really understand how insulting he has been in making a scene, but the original audience would have gasped at his insolence. But just as the father did not disown the younger son for disrespecting him, he did not disown the older one either. He was patient with both.

How can someone who was so obedient, dependable, steady, and respectable become the "villain" of this story? How did the older son become so estranged from his father? He had never left the house but he was more lost than his brother had been. Jesus has, of course, placed the Pharisees in this story; they're the older brother. They're mad that Jesus eats with the common sinners who don't deserve His attention. They assume that God only helps those who help themselves, who obey as well as they can, and never give Him any trouble. They hate the thought that God would accept people who didn't deserve it. And notice where it got them: outside the Father's house, unwilling to join the party if it includes grace for the wrong kind of sinners.

Jesus did not give this parable an ending, He didn't tell us how the older son responded. But knowing who the two sons represent and who the father represents, what do you think that older son did? He killed his father. Why do I say that? Not a single commentary I read came to this same conclusion, but I think I'm right. What did the Pharisees do to Jesus? Did they respond to His reasoning with them by eventually seeing the errors of their ways and realizing that the wayward sinners should be forgiven and welcomed home? No, they became more and more furious with Him and so hardened towards Him that they set up the events that would lead to His death. So while both of this man's sons were lost, only the younger one who indulged his wild side reconciled with the father; the older son stayed lost and further alienated himself. In Matthew 21:31 Jesus told the chief priests and the elders that, "*Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you,*" and they angrily resented that.

Conclusion

Who do you identify with in this parable, the younger or the older son? Some of us may identify with the younger son, having gone out into the world intent on finding excitement and wild living. And you found that, just like the prodigal, that wild, reckless living is not fulfilling; it's eventually a dead end. But the Father can forgive anything that you've done. I've heard people say things like, "God would never take someone like me who has done the terrible things that I've done." They usually mean it in a self-deprecating way, but who they're actually insulting is God. They are saying that God has limits on His forgiveness, and they've tested and found those limits. They're not worth His love. But they don't really know the heart of the Father, just as the son didn't fully know his father. Nothing that you've done is beyond God's forgiveness, so come home and feel His embrace.

Others of us identify with the older brother because we played by the rules. That's me. I have, for the most part, lived an obedient life. I have obeyed my parents, obeyed the law, obeyed my teachers, and obeyed God. I did things right, not that I have any delusions of sinlessness, I've certainly messed up. But I'm a straight arrow, I pride myself on having done things right. If I'm honest, the idea that someone could thumb their nose at God, live wildly and selfishly for many, many years, and then come to their senses and then be given great rewards by God - that doesn't seem very fair. Where's my party? Where's my royal robe and ring; when does the fattened calf get slaughtered for me? I've earned it, they haven't.

Older brothers need to ask themselves some hard questions: Does my busyness and serving my heavenly Father make me unaware of how much He loves me? Do I feel that I gave Him everything but that I have no joy and delight in Him? If so, then I am fundamentally missing out on who my amazing Creator God, my loving heavenly Father, is. And if you can't get excited about other sinners that the Father brings to repentance and lavishes His grace on, then you really don't understand God. You should be excited to join the party, to dance and sing along to the music, rejoicing that your brother who was lost is now found, brought from death to life!

How do I obey God without becoming a bitter older brother? I obey out of joy and profound gratitude for the way that God has made me a son and forgiven me my enormous debt of sin. Whether they are respectable or notorious sins doesn't matter, we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness through Jesus. When we grasp how we are no better than anyone else, and just how deep His mercy and amazing His grace is, we will live in gratitude and joy as His forgiven children, just waiting to feast with Him at His table.

Which son needs redemption? They both do! They both turned away from the father in their own ways - one in a disreputable, scandalous way; the other in a silent, respectable, but no less contemptible way. One's *disobedience* separated him from the father and the other's *obedience* separated him from the father. Shane Barnard says that, "while one son has trampled on the amazing love of his father in his hurry to run away from it, the other son has been surrounded by it every moment of his life, and yet has missed it all together!"⁶ The father had every right to disinherit either one of them, but he was patient and continued to love them both.

Jesus loves sinners and welcomes them into the kingdom, and He even loves Pharisees and begs them to come into the kingdom and experience the Father's love! The definition of "prodigal" is not "wayward" but someone who is recklessly wasteful, and it's been noted that the younger son is not the only prodigal in the parable; the father is a prodigal father for recklessly wasting his love and his wealth on his returned son. And so we can also understand God as the prodigal God who recklessly "wastes" His love and His treasures on His redeemed children!⁷

➔ Transition to Communion: The Lord prepares us a feast for His returning, forgiven children. Will you come to the table and eat and rejoice that the lost are found? Or will you stand outside angry that your efforts to save yourself are not acknowledged?

Benediction

Revelation 1:5b-6 – *"To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."*

⁶ Shane Barnard, "The Angry Pursuit of Holiness" from Relevant Magazine's July-August 2005 issue.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), p. xvii.