

## Jesus the Storyteller, Parable of The Lost Sons, Luke 15:1-2, 11-32, 9/5/21

This may be the most beautiful portrait of the heart of God toward sinners in the entire Bible. This is a parable of the Gospel told by Jesus using the story of a Father with two very different sons. It's common to hear parents say that when they had their first child they thought they were such great parents because their child napped well, ate well, obeyed and was pleasant, compliant. And they were very proud of themselves...and then they had a second child and realized they weren't winning the parent of the year award. This child didn't go down for naps, was picky eater, strong-willed and irritable. You learn quickly that children come out of the womb all different, different personalities and you can't parent them all the same. Show of hands- how many of you tend to color inside the lines...be more of the compliant rule follower types? How many of you like to color outside the lines, you tend to question the rules and find your way around them? OK- Now I know who to look at when I'm preaching this sermon! Jesus tells a story about siblings, two sons who are very different from one another- one a rule follower and one a rule-breaker and as different as they may be in personality, both of them have the same heart condition and both are alienated from the heart of the Father. Jesus is speaking to the two primary ways that humanity rebels against God, outward rebellion and inward rebellion. And as read in the Scripture video- Jesus was telling this parable to both the outwardly rebellious sinners and the inwardly rebellious pharisees to help them both see themselves in these brothers and show them the way back to the heart of the father.

**The Lost Younger Brother.** Read: v.11-12. The hearers of this story in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Middle East would have been shocked by such request. This is not, "Can I have a loan for a down payment on a house." If you have an estate, and have two sons 2/3s of estate would be inherited by the firstborn, 1/3 for younger. Of course, this happened when father died. One scholar says, "To ask for the inheritance when the father was still alive is to wish him dead. It would be like saying, I want your stuff but I don't want you."<sup>1</sup> Now throughout this parable we are going to get a clear portrait of sin- Just like Jesus' audience we should see ourselves in these brothers. The leaving of the younger son shows us the first- **#1 Sin is the desire to be independent from God.** The son is tired of being under the roof of the father. "I want to run my own life." This is desire to break off from God's ways, desires and to define life, moral, identity and purpose on our own lives on in every human heart.

But the hearers would have been even more astonished at **the response of the father.** An ancient middle eastern shame/honor culture- saying this to your father was unheard of, it would have brought shame upon the family name. He should have put the son in his place. He should have punished this son. But this isn't what this father did. He gave the son what he wanted. **V.12b** He divided his property and gave it to him...which came at great cost. Why? Because he was a wise father, he knew the son had already left him in his heart. God is a gentleman, he doesn't force us. If we want liberty he will let us pursue it, even though he knows all we will get is bondage. It is a portrait of a wise and exceptionally loving father who endured the rejection of his son with incredible longsuffering and meekness.

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Hand resource unknown, quoted by Tim Keller

The son not only gets out from under the father's roof, but out from under the father's rules: **Read v.13-** immediately he lives like a Rockstar, a way that would never be permitted under the father's roof. **#2 Sin is the desire for fulfillment on our own terms.** We want what we want, and when we want it...and we don't want anyone to tell us otherwise. Even though we know what God says about where to find life and ultimate fulfillment, the immediate seems better to us. I see this in relationships all the time. People convince themselves this is the right guy or the right girl for them, rush into it, even though many around them are saying no. One of my counseling mantras is fools rush in and fools rush out of relationships. And so this son chases fulfillment on his own terms. But the hard lesson that some of us have learned is that while sin is fun for a season... but that season always comes to a bitter end. **Read v.14-16.** He comes down to his last dime, his friends abandon him and ends up with the pigs. His new life ends with him taking the lowest job in all of Israel—feeding pigs. Pigs were unclean, defiled--and there we find him dirty, hungry and fighting over pods with the pigs...wondering how in the world he got there. Talk about hitting rock bottom. **#3 Sin desires to wreck your life.** Jesus said, the enemy seeks to kill, steal and destroy your life. Sin is never content to live in small corners... it doesn't want to take part, it wants to take over. **James 1:14-15 Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.<sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.** Death in our relationships, death in our spiritual life, death in our family, death in our finances, death to our health. When we stop and actually consider what your sin looks like, it's ugly isn't it? Anger problem, your addiction issue, your obsession with your physical appearance, your lust, your lying...ugly. And if we ended there, we would all be depressed. But it was the bottom of the pit that this younger brother finally turned. **Read v.17-19 v.17 But when he came to his senses...**This is a beautiful statement. It is a statement of repentance. He had a turning of mind and heart away from himself, his lifestyle, he came to back to reality about what his sin was doing, and he turned toward the heart of his father.

**[Blank Slide] Read v.20-** The picture here is that the Father would stand at the edge of his property and look for the son, saying maybe today is the day my son returns. And when he did he ran to him. Middle eastern patriarchs didn't run. Women did, children...but it would have been undignified. If anyone should have been running it should have been the son to the father. And the father embraces him, plants a big kiss on him. The son repents to his father...but his father cuts him off- **Read v.22-24.** Wow, what revolutionary unconditional love, forgiveness and grace. He doesn't stand arms crossed saying about time. He doesn't lecture him, he doesn't make him prove himself or earn back his standing... he immediately forgives and restores the son. Stunning. But it's only one of the lost sons, there is another lost son that we now meet.

### **The Lost Elder Brother**

**Read v.25-27...** "praise the Lord! I can't wait to see my brother!" Nope...**Read v.28a.** He's furious. He refuses to come into the party, which would have publicly humiliated the father. And so the Father leaves the party and goes out to him. And the son gives it to him...**Read v.29-30-** The elder son is completely offended by the extravagant love of his Father toward his undeserving brother, he thinks that if anyone should get a party like this it should be him. "YOU OWE ME for my goodness!" I've earned it! **#4 Sin in the heart disguises itself as outward**

**goodness.** As good and obedient as this son had been, he reveals that inward, his heart was just as cold and alienated as the younger brother's heart was in his outward rebellion. We'll come back to that...But the father responds. **V.31-32.** And this is where the story ends. We don't know if the son comes into the party or stays outside. Cliffhanger. Jesus was saying to the pharisees- it's your move, will you repent and come into the party, or will you remain outside of God's house in your pride and anger? That's the end of the parable- I want to make a few applications to our lives. In this one parable, Jesus communicates: Who God is at heart, what keeps us lost, how we can be found.

### **Who God is at heart.**

One of Christian history's most famous paintings is Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. What many don't know is that this was actually Rembrandt's second painting of the Prodigal Son; the first he did in 1637 when he was only 30 years old. In that version, Rembrandt places the **Prodigal Son in a brothel [Picture]**--the colors are bright; he's got this elated look on his face, a drink in one hand and a woman on his lap. And, if you look close, you can see Rembrandt painted his own face as the face of the prodigal.<sup>2</sup>

In this second version, which Rembrandt painted at the very end of his life (this was, in fact, his last painting, his final declaration to the world), it's clear that his view of the story had changed. The **mood of this version [Picture]** is fundamentally different. In this one, everything is dark, the colors are muted, and you can feel the brokenness of the prodigal, you can't see his face purposely and the light in the picture directs everything to the father and his overwhelming compassion. In the first painting, the focus was on the prodigal; in the second, the focus is on the father. Rembrandt at the end of his life got it- the main character in this story is not the younger son, or the older son...it is the Father. Jesus wants us to see **who God is at heart.**

There are many people who struggle with the idea that God as Father. Some who think of Father as patriarchal and harsh and ruling and controlling. Or a father that was angry and cold and distracted. But the picture of this Father is radically different. His emotional abandon, his tenderness, his willingness to receive the agony of rejected love. His extravagance and borderline reckless use of his wealth for someone so undeserving... For all of his power and majesty he is long suffering and patient and tender. He loves you and longs to be with you. No one ever described God quite like this way before Jesus. How do you see the heart of the God toward you? The shocking news is that God's love is even at the darkest, ugliest depths of our pits. In the cancel culture we live in where if you offend someone you are cancelled, thank God that he doesn't operate that way. We have offended God over and over again, and yet he does not cancel us, wave after wave of his love is toward us. If we don't understand the heart of God toward lost people, we will never understand why God does what he does.

### **What keeps us lost**

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<sup>2</sup> JD Greear Illustration

The younger son is a picture of sin that is traditional. Everyone looks at this as sin. Prostitutes, rebellion, addiction, wild life, pig slop, down in the gutter. Self-liberation, Self-indulgence... that's sin.

But in the older son- Jesus turns the table. One son is very, very good and obedient and the other is very very bad and rebellious and both of them are alienated from the father's heart. They had more in common than you might think. Each of them wanted the father's things but not the father. Each of them used the father to get what they really loved. They didn't love the father, they loved the status, the wealth...but they did it differently, one through being very good and one through being very bad. They are both lost, one lost in his badness and one lost in his goodness. And in the end, the one that is saved is the rebellious one and not the good one, as far as we know. The man of morality is lost, and the rebel was saved. And it gets worse, the man of goodness wasn't lost in spite of his goodness but because of it. "I have never disobeyed him." It's not his sins in the traditional sense... It's his greater sin, his self-righteousness, self-justification. Do you see yourself in the portrait of sin?

### How we can be found

From this parable, Jesus says we need three things to be saved:

**#1 We need the initiating love of the Father.** Notice, it is the Father who goes out to both sons to bring them in. D.L. Moody- "When the prodigal came home, grace met him and embraced him. The Law said stone him but grace said embrace him. Law said smite him but grace said kiss him. The Law went after him and bound him but grace said let him loose and let him free." But he goes out with grace and love to the older brother and encouraged him to come in. He left the party to go out to his son. And he is speaking to the Pharisees...who he knows are going to be the ones who kill him. He seeks us first. And if you don't know him, he is seeking you right now. And the tragedy is many refuse to come into the house. The house is a metaphor for not only a relationship with God, but eternity in his presence. Outside the house is a metaphor for rejecting a relationship with God, and spending eternity away from his presence. And life apart from a relationship and the presence of God is hell. Come into the house!

**#2 We need to repent of our deeper sin problem.** God never turns a cold shoulder to true repentance. But it may not be the repentance you think. It is not repentance to say- I've done some bad things, I've made mistakes, but I'm a good person- I do lots of good things, I'm kind to others and better than most. That's not repentance. It's not, God I have really messed up and so I'm going to try harder to pray, do more good things and then you'll see how good I've been. That's not repentance. Repentance is a turning of your heart and mind away from the self-liberating ways of the younger son, and the self-saving ways of the older son. Have you stopped running to do things your own way, to chase freedom from God's rule, to live according to your own morality, identity and purpose? Have you come to see everything you have every wanted you have under the roof of God? Self-saving- Have you come to see your goodness is not enough? That you secretly judge everyone else who doesn't measure up to your standards. That you resent those who get mercy because they don't deserve it. Have you embraced your utter inability to fix yourself, make yourself right?

**#3 You need to embrace the brother who brings you home.** What made the younger son so angry? Partly because the father was spending extravagantly on the undeserving younger brother, at the elder brother's expense! The young brother could only be brought in by the enormous cost of the elder brother. Someone has to pay, it's not free. But what would a true elder brother have done? He would have seen the agony of the father and say, "Father, I'm going to go out and look for my brother. And if he has gone out and ruined his life and squandered his inheritance, I will bring him home at my own expense." The younger brother didn't have a true elder brother. But we do! Jesus Christ, who tells the parable, is the true elder brother. He is the shepherd who leaves the 99 to look for the one. He is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He gives us a bad elder brother so we will long for the true one. In Jesus, we have one who has left his home in heaven to come and find us. In Jesus, we have one who purchased us at the expense of his own life. On the cross, Jesus was stripped naked so that we would be clothed with a robe of honor we don't deserve. There he paid the debt we owe. Everything he had, he shares with us. To the degree you see that, if the Holy Spirit opens your spiritual eyes to see this, you will be changed, you will not be able to live the same again.

**Communion-** We remind ourselves that we are all prodigals and we are all elder brothers. But because of true elder brother- Jesus, did what we are incapable of doing, we can be in the house with the father forever.