

THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR HIS LOST SONS

Luke 15:11-32

Key Verse: 20b

“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.”

Jesus was criticized for welcoming sinners and eating with them. In response, Jesus tells three parables of the joy of finding the lost: a shepherd finds his sheep, a woman finds her coin. Now he tells the longest and most famous of the parables: The Parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Lost Son. May we find ourselves in this parable and God's patient love for us.

Look at verses 11-12. Jesus continued: **“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.”**

Usually children get their father's inheritance after he dies. But this son did not want to wait. He was hoping his father would die soon so he could get a lot of money. He was rude and disgraceful. No father would be happy to call him “my son.” Not only was the son rude, he was also foolish. Verse 13 says: **“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.”** To squander means to “waste something, especially money or time, in a reckless and foolish manner.” The son didn't think about investing his time or money wisely or carefully. Perhaps his motto was, “Let's eat and drink for tomorrow we die!” or “You only live once, so party(!) while you have the chance!” As long as he had money, gold diggers hung out with him. He got a few sleazy girlfriends whom he wined and dined and brought on exotic trips to Paris, Rome and Casablanca.

It was then that his life took a drastic turn for the worse. When he went to draw money at the cash station, the machine said “insufficient funds.” His credit cards were all rejected as maxed out. He couldn't even take a taxi home after a night out. His well ran dry. To make things worse, a severe famine hit the country. The Bible says of his condition: **“he began to be in need.”** Until that moment, he had never experienced need. He had been provided for by his father. For the first time, this spoiled youngie son had to get a job.

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So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. For a Jewish boy, it was the most humiliating job, like sorting trash. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. He reached the end of his rope. He hit rock bottom.

It's a sad truth, but many people have to experience need or sorrow to have a positive change of life. When things are going well, people usually don't seek a change. Francis of Assisi was born into a rich family. He had no worries or needs. But as a soldier he became a prisoner of war. He also had a bout with illness. And he had compassion on beggars. Through these events of life and Jesus' words to go preach and take no money, he decided to give up his father's inheritance and follow Christ, poorly and purely. His decision to do something radical for Christ made him a great man in human history, admired by so many.

Look at verses 17-20a. **“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.”**

He came to his senses. He realized, really for the first time, his true situation. He realized his dad wasn't so bad after all. Actually his dad treated his servants quite well with food to spare. Probably the father gave his servants plenty of vacation days, when they asked, hospital visits when they were sick, and bonuses to celebrate birthday parties. More than this, the prodigal son realized what a jerk he had been. He realized: “I sinned against God and against my dad. Man, what an idiot I've been. I shouldn't even be called his son.” So, with heavy feet, he started on his journey home. Maybe he thought many times of turning back around, abandoning his attempt to come home. He was so ashamed. Here's where the story takes another surprising turn. Look at verse 20b.

“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.”

Go figure! Who would've thought that the father would do this? Many fathers might have bolted the front door shut saying, “Sorry son, I gave your room

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to someone who would pay rent! Go away!” The son had so dishonored his father that at least one could expect a stern lecture from his dad essentially saying, “You should have never left home. Now you are chewing the consequences of your bad choices. Don’t say I didn’t tell you so.”

Instead, the father was waiting, longing each day, looking from his porch: “Maybe today—maybe my son will come back today. O my son, come home. Just let me see your face again.” He even ran to his son to welcome him. He gave his son no chance to change his mind and run away again. He welcomed him back with wide open arms and a kiss. He didn’t even mind that his son looked and smelled like a fish or a pig.

“The son said his rehearsed lines: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But before he could ask for a servant’s job, the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it 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. The father’s joy was overflowing. Greater than the joy of the shepherd who finds his lost sheep, or the woman who finds her lost coin, the father’s joy was spilling over to through a huge celebration party with the prize cow.

Surprisingly, the parable doesn’t end here, while the other two parables did. The other two parables ended with a celebration and an explanation that this is heaven’s joy when one sinner repents. This parable has another character to deal with: the older son.

The older son was in the field, doing his chores, like a good son should do. He heard music and dancing. So he called a servant and asked him, “Hey man, what’s going on? What’s all the noise?” “Haven’t you heard or seen? Your brother has come back home, and your dad killed the fattened calf and threw a celebration for him, because he has him back safe and sound. Isn’t it awesome? Barbecue ribs! Whohoo!”

The older brother did not think it was awesome. Rather, he became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him: **“Son, come in. Come and greet your brother, whom you haven’t seen for so**

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long.” But he answered his father, ‘You got to be kidding! Man! 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. What’s up with that! But when this juvenile delinquent son of yours who has wasted your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! What is wrong with you?’”

Again, any normal father would likely say at this point, “Don’t you sass at me, boy!” Go to your room! In fact, why don’t you move out tonight?” But the father was so patient, understanding and kind.

He said, **“My son, you are 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 the parable is not just about throwing a party for a runaway child who comes back home. It’s also about the older brother who should be happy that his long lost brother has come home. After all, he is his brother. The older brother was worse than Jonah.

After the prophet Jonah preached and the wicked Ninevites repented, that should be the happy end of the story. But there is another chapter in the story to deal with Jonah. God still has a message for Jonah: **“Don’t you care about perishing sinners at all?”** God wanted Jonah to care about wicked Gentiles, non-Jewish people. How much more should a Jewish older brother care about his younger Jewish brother! But he didn’t care. It seems he would have preferred that his brother never came home, but simply died in a foreign land.

Not only did he not care about his brother. He also did not care about his father’s feelings. He did not care that his father often cried himself to sleep, longing for his younger son to come home. He did not care that his father was sad whenever he passed his younger son’s bedroom or when his younger son’s birthday passed. He disowned his brother saying, “this son of yours,” rather than “this brother of mine.”

The older son was too consumed about his own life and performance. And yet his words are quite telling. He called his work “slaving” for his father. He really wanted to have a party with his friends. He was physically close to his father, but he was emotionally far away. He was far away from his father’s heart.

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Who does the Father represent? Who loves his children with such patience as this? Only God loves with perfect love like this, for both of his children. He patiently loved his runaway son. He also patiently loved his older son. God loves all his children. He doesn't want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

In the first two parables, the finder diligently looks for what is lost. But in this parable, the father has long-suffering patience for his lost sons: one who ran away, and one who stayed at home. Neither of them understood the father's love and patience. Both of them hurt the father without even realizing it. The father doesn't force his rules or his love on his children. He lets them self-discover. He reasons with them lovingly. Jesus was doing this at that very moment.

Jesus' critics were just like the older son. The Pharisees did all the right things outwardly. They were physically near God, near the temple, doing the right things that religious guys should do. But they were still far from God's heart of love. They didn't care about their erring brothers and sisters. They didn't care about God's love to seek and save the lost. They criticized Jesus instead of celebrating with him.

How about you? Where do you find yourself in the parable? Are you like the younger son or the older son or the father or the servant just reporting to the older brother?

In my youth, I faithfully attended church. In high school, I didn't drink or smoke or have a girlfriend, well at first. I was like the older son, who did all the right things outwardly. During my senior year in high school, my dad died of a sudden heart attack. I was shaken. But I soon abused my father's absence to stay out late a girlfriend. Yes I got a girlfriend. So I was slipping towards the younger son's lifestyle. One night I came home late about 2 a.m. My mother was worried about me and waiting for me. She said, "Where have you been?" I replied, "It's none of your business." I couldn't believe I spoke to my widowed mother so rudely. It was sin at work in me, an iceberg of sin, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. Thanks be to God Jesus found me within a year of my father's death. Jesus sought and found me through UBF ministry during my freshman year at Northwestern University. Jesus led me to a new life in him, a new life in the Father's love.

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Jesus is still seeking sinners and calling them home. There's a song about this: Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. See, on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me. Come home, come home. You who are weary, come home. Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling, calling, "O sinner, come home!"

Jesus calls us home to the Father's love, whether you've rebelled and gone far away or whether you've given the appearance that you've stayed close to home. The fact is, we've all sinned against God and against people. We've all lived self-centered lives, not really caring about others' sufferings and needs. We've all abandoned God and his truth for idols and cesspools of sin, like lying, cheating, hating and sexual immorality.

Thanks be to God that he does not treat us as our sins deserve. Jesus took the guilt and punishment of our sins—the sins of all who trust and obey him as Savior and Lord. John 1:12 assures all Christians of their standing with God, **"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."** Through Christ, our sins are forgiven (Ac 10:43). Through Jesus, we have an inheritance kept in heaven for us (1Pe 1:4). Through him, we are redeemed from an empty way of life and can live an abundant and fruitful life that honors and glorifies God and blesses others (1Pe 1:18; Jn 10:10; 15:16; Ro 15:16; Col 2:10).

Jesus wants to bring his lost children home. Jesus wants them to live in the Father's love, whether they are lost like the younger son or lost like the older son. May we all come home to God's love. Furthermore, may we all participate in the Father's love by helping others with love and prayer to come home to his love.