

Father's Day Sermon: The Father Who Waits, The Sons Who Wander

Luke 15:11-32

Main Idea

Every person is lost apart from God. Some wander far away, others stay rather nearby, but the Father longs to restore fellowship with both.

Introduction

On Father's Day, our attention naturally goes to the father in Jesus' most famous parable. Many know it as "The Prodigal Son." But perhaps we've misunderstood the title.

The word "prodigal" does not primarily mean "returning wayward son." It means "recklessly extravagant. Lavishly spending everything." The late pastor and author Tim Keller famously argued that the father is the true prodigal because of the extravagance of his grace.

While there is much to appreciate in Keller's work, I think the father is not reckless. He is righteous. He is wise. He is compassionate. He is patient.

The reckless ones are the sons. One wastes his inheritance in a distant country. The other wastes his inheritance while standing in the father's field. One rebels openly. The other rebels respectably. One breaks all the rules. The other keeps all the rules while despising the father.

And between them stands a father who longs for both sons to come home.

I. THE YOUNGER SON IS LOST THROUGH REBELLION

The younger son's request was shocking. "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me."

In effect he says, "I want your stuff, but I don't want you." He is treating his father as a bank account rather than a father.

This is functionally wishing for the father's death. The tragedy is not merely that he leaves home. The tragedy is that he has already left his father long before he leaves the farm.

The younger son wants freedom without relationship. He wants blessing without fellowship. Inheritance without intimacy. And isn't that the temptation of every human heart?

We want God's gifts. We want God's blessings. We want God's protection. We want God's provision. We just don't necessarily want God. The younger son simply says out loud what many people quietly believe.

The Road to Repentance

Eventually the money runs out. The new so-called friends disappear. And then the famine arrives. The younger son finds himself feeding pigs. For a Jewish audience, Jesus could hardly paint a darker picture.

The boy who wanted everything now has nothing. The boy who wanted freedom is now a slave. The boy who wanted abundance now envies pig food. Yet grace often begins where pride finally dies.

Luke says, "He came to himself." The younger son sees reality. He confesses his sin. He turns toward home.

Repentance is not merely feeling bad. It is agreeing with God about your condition and turning toward Him.

The younger son's greatest sin was not wasting his inheritance. The inheritance was only money. His greatest sin was treating his father as though he were already dead.

When he asks for the inheritance he is saying, "I want what belongs to you, but I do not want you." That is the essence of sin.

Adam and Eve wanted God's world without God's rule. Israel wanted God's blessings without God's presence. We want God's gifts without God Himself. The son isn't rejecting poverty and choosing wealth. He is rejecting relationship and choosing autonomy.

The father loses more than property. He loses:

His Honor

Everyone in the village knows what happened. The son has publicly humiliated him. The father becomes an object of pity and gossip.

Every trip to the market brings whispers. Every family gathering reminds him that one son is gone.

His Fellowship

This may be the deepest wound. The father doesn't miss the money. He misses his son. Every father understands this. Children are not interchangeable. The empty chair hurts. The silence hurts. The absence hurts. The younger son does not simply leave home. He leaves a broken-hearted father behind.

His Dreams

Every father has hopes for his children. Imagine the years invested. Teaching. Working together. Preparing an inheritance. Building something for the next generation. And in a moment the son throws all of it away.

The father loses not merely what he has built but what he imagined might be. That is often the deepest pain of a parent. Not simply what was lost. What might have been.

Every sin is cosmic ingratitude. Every act of rebellion is the creature telling the Creator, "I want your gifts but not your presence."

The younger son's rebellion is easy to see. He leaves home. He wastes the inheritance. He disgraces his father. He ends up feeding pigs. Nobody struggles to identify his sin.

The thing is that Jesus is not finished telling the story. In fact, if this parable ended with the father running down the road and embracing his broken son, we would all know exactly who the villain is. The younger son.

But Jesus refuses to let us end the story there. Why? Because there is another son. And his rebellion is far more difficult to recognize.

Imagine a father with two sons. One son storms out of the house, slams the door, and leaves town. Everyone notices. Everyone talks about it. Everyone recognizes the rebellion. But what if the second son never leaves?

What if he stays home? Works hard. Does his chores. Shows up every day. Says all the right things. And yet, deep inside, loves the inheritance more than the father?

Which son is actually farther away? That is the uncomfortable question Jesus now asks. Because the younger son wanted the father's gifts without the father's presence. But as we are about to discover, the older son wanted exactly the same thing.

Younger brother says, "Give me my inheritance."

Older brother says, "Look what I've earned."

They use different methods. But that is the same heart. The younger brother used rebellion to get the father's things. The older brother used obedience to get the father's things.

II. THE ELDER SON IS LOST THROUGH SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

The surprise of the parable is that Jesus spends nearly as much time talking about the older brother as the younger.

Many people assume the older brother is the hero. But he isn't. In many ways he is just as lost. Perhaps more dangerous because he doesn't realize it.

One of the fascinating cultural observations is that the elder brother should have acted as mediator when the younger son made his outrageous request. He should have protected the family. He should have sought reconciliation. He should have honored his father. Instead, he remains silent.

And in doing so, he benefits. The inheritance is divided. The elder brother receives the larger share. The younger leaves. The elder stays. And everyone assumes he is faithful. But faithfulness and proximity are not the same thing.

You can stay in the father's house and still be far from the father's heart.

His Heart Is Revealed

When the younger brother returns, the elder brother's true condition is exposed. Listen to his language. "Look! These many years I have served you." The word "served" here carries the idea of slavery.

He doesn't see himself as a son. He sees himself as an employee. Then he says, "I never disobeyed your command." Then, "You never gave me..."

Everything is transactional. Everything is accounting. Everything is performance. Everything is merit. His relationship with his father is built on what he believes he deserves.

He is not enjoying his father. He is leveraging his obedience. Here Tim Keller makes a profound observation. The elder brother uses his moral record to put God in his debt. That is the essence of self-righteousness.

The younger brother wanted freedom without the father. The older brother wanted the father's things without the father. The difference is that one used rebellion to get them and the other used obedience. That is devastating.

There are people who rebel against God by breaking every rule. There are people who rebel against God by making rules their god. One says, "Nobody will tell me what to do." The other says, "Look at everything I've done."

One finds identity in freedom. The other finds identity in control. One trusts in self-expression. The other trusts in self-righteousness. But both are trying to avoid simple childlike dependence upon the Father.

Sometimes the people closest to church life can be the ones most tempted toward elder-brother thinking. We can become more concerned with procedures than people. More concerned with winning arguments than restoring relationships. More concerned with preserving our influence than seeing sinners welcomed home. More concerned with being right than rejoicing.

The older brother is fundamentally about **ownership**. Notice his language, "All these years I have been serving you..." "You never gave me..." "This son of yours..." He doesn't sound like a son. He sounds like a shareholder.

The entire speech is built around entitlement. His real complaint is not that his brother returned. His complaint is that his father exercised authority in a way he did not approve.

The older brother's great sin was not obedience itself. Obedience is good. Faithfulness is good. Service is good. Tradition can be good. Structure can be good. The problem comes when we begin to confuse stewardship with ownership.

The older brother forgot whose farm it was. Whose robe it was. Whose ring it was. Whose calf it was. Who was throwing the banquet. Most importantly, whose family it was. Everything belonged to the father.

The older brother had been entrusted with much, but he had come to believe it belonged to him. He had replaced grace with self-righteousness. He considered his life and drew some conclusions. Not "I need mercy." But, "God owes me." And nothing reveals self-righteousness faster than someone else receiving grace.

Two Forms of Lostness

The younger brother says, "I'll live however I want." The elder brother says, "I'll obey so I can get what I want." Different strategies but the same destination. Both are trying to control life without surrendering to the father.

One breaks the rules. One keeps the rules. But neither loves the father. But the father longs for both sons.

III. THE FATHER LONGS FOR BOTH SONS

The father is the constant in the story. The sons change. The father does not. The younger runs away. The father waits. The younger returns. The father runs.

The elder refuses to enter. The father goes out to him too. Notice this carefully. The father pursues both sons. He runs toward the rebel. He pleads with the religious. He seeks the immoral. He seeks the moralist.

He seeks the sinner in the far country. He seeks the sinner standing in the church pew. The father refuses to abandon either.

A Father's Heart

This is why the story has resonated for centuries. Every good father understands something of this. Children must make choices. Parents cannot force faith. Parents cannot force wisdom. Parents cannot force repentance. But loving fathers never stop longing for restored fellowship.

The father is not weak. He is strong enough to forgive. He is humble enough to absorb the offense. He is patient enough to wait. He is compassionate enough to welcome. He is righteous enough to love both sons without approving either son's sin.

That is a picture of our heavenly Father.

IV. THE PARABLE POINTS US TO THE TRUE ELDER BROTHER

There is something striking about how Jesus ends the story. The elder brother refuses to go into the feast. The father pleads. And then...the story stops. It immediately fades to black. We never learn what the elder brother does. Why?

Because Jesus is putting the Pharisees into the story. They must decide how the story ends. Will they rejoice when sinners come home? Or will they remain outside? The ending is unfinished because the listener must finish it.

But there is another reason. The elder brother fails. He never does what an elder brother should do. He never seeks his brother. He never reconciles the family. He never bears a cost. He never brings the lost son home.

Which means we need a better elder brother. We need one who actually comes looking for us. Not merely across a field. Not merely to a distant country. But from heaven to earth. Jesus is the Elder Brother the older brother should have been.

He left the Father's house. He sought the lost. He paid the cost. He bore the shame. He absorbed the debt.

As Keller beautifully writes, “On the cross Jesus was treated as an outcast so that we could be brought into God's family freely by grace.” At Calvary, Jesus did what neither son could do. He reconciled us to the Father.

Which Son Are You?

The genius of the parable is that most people initially identify with neither son. But Jesus will not allow that. You must choose.

Are you the younger brother? Running from God? Living on your own terms? Needing to come home?

Or are you the elder brother? Respectable. Religious. Moral. Yet secretly convinced God owes you something? The Father's invitation is the same for both.

Come home. Not because you've earned it. Not because you've fixed yourself. Not because you've paid your debt. But because Christ has paid it.

The feast is ready. The Father is waiting. The true and perfect Elder Brother has made the way.

The only question left is whether we will come in.