

The Two Lost Sons

This morning we will be in Luke 15:11-32, but to give important context and set the groundwork for our passage today I will read starting from verse 1.

Now ^zthe tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

²And the Pharisees and the scribes ^agrumbled, saying, ^b“This man receives sinners and ^ceats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ⁴^d“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, ^eif he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine ^fin the open country, and ^ggo after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, ^hhe lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for ⁱI have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who ^rrepents than over ninety-nine ^krighteous persons who need no repentance.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, ^rif she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?

⁹And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

¹¹And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me ^mthe share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided ⁿhis property between them. ¹³Not 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 ^oreckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to ²one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he ^pwas longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

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¹⁷“But ^qwhen he ^rcame to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, ^sI have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹^uI am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’” ²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ^vran and ^wembraced him and ^xkissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ^uI am no longer worthy to be called your son.’” ²²But the father said to his servants, ⁴‘Bring quickly ^ythe best robe, and put it on him, and put ^za ring on his hand, and ^ashoes on his feet. ²³And bring ^bthe fattened calf and kill it, and ^clet us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son ^dwas dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷And 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.’” ²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹but 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 ^ecelebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, ^rwho has devoured ^gyour property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’” ³¹And he said to him, ‘Son, ^hyou are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²It was fitting ^eto celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Prayer -

Intro -

Purposes of the parables:

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- 1) Awaken insight
- 2) Stimulate the Conscience
- 3) Move you to action

So, before we can get into the parable of the prodigal son, we have to look back a few verses to the beginning of the chapter. Jesus is eating with the tax collectors and sinners, as Jesus often did. And the Pharisees and the Scribes, the “religious” leaders were grumbling about it. We don’t know exactly why they were grumbling, we’re not told here -

- maybe they expected that they (the pharisees) should get Jesus’ attention since they were of course important and righteous men;
- maybe they felt that Jesus (as a prominent religious teacher like themselves) should be likewise repulsed by these clearly sinful people;
- maybe they were just grumpy dudes who liked to complain about stuff.

I think it was probably all of the above. But Jesus knew what was in their hearts, and he responded to them with three parables. The first two we won’t deal with in detail, but rather reference quickly as they will be useful later when we get to the parable of the prodigal son.

The first, a man loses one sheep out of one hundred. He leaves the ninety-nine, and goes after the one. And when he finds it he celebrates with all his friends. Then Jesus says that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. This is a gentle shot at the pharisees. And, to be clear, Jesus is NOT saying that the pharisees are righteous and free from sin, but it is rather a tongue-in-cheek phrase addressing the pharisees perceptions of their own standing and value. They are all sinners. Romans 3:10 says:

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;

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So, the tax collectors and sinners are sinners, and the pharisees and the scribes are sinners. Jesus is addressing the pharisees' perception of their own righteousness and the reality of their sinfulness and need for repentance.

The second, a woman loses one coin out of ten, and she cleans the whole house searching for her lost coin. And when she finds it, she calls her friends over for a celebration.

Then we get to the parable known as "The Prodigal Son". Look with me at verse 11.

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 ^mthe share of property that is coming to me.'

Remember, Jesus is responding to the pharisees' grumbling. Jesus is making a comparison of sorts between the "sinners" and the "righteous". So right out of the gate Jesus is making clear to his audience that this son, the younger son is a sinner. Jewish law (Deut. 21:17) was that if a man had two sons, upon the father's death, the older son would get two thirds of the fathers property, and the younger son would get the remaining third. These Jewish listeners would also know that a son who disrespects his parents was to be taken before the city leaders and stoned to death (Deut. 21:18-21). This is not like a son today asking dad to help pay for a first apartment. This is a bold demand: "Father, **give me** the share of property that is coming to me." This is a son who is saying, "I don't need you, I don't want you, give me what's mine and get out of my way. Don't hold me back, Dad, I've got a life to live, and it doesn't include you." And what does the father do?

And he divided ⁿhis property between them.

So the father gives his younger son one third of all he owns. He splits it up, and he says here you go.

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¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country,

So the father gives his son one third of all he has, and his son doesn't hang around but just the few days necessary to sell all his assets for cold, hard cash, then he leaves and goes to a far away land. This sounds familiar doesn't it. The thing about us sinners, is that when we sin, we tend to want to get as far away from God as we can. Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden after their sin (Gen. 3:8):

⁸And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool³ of the day, and the man and his wife ^bhid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Jonah got on a boat to Tarshish to flee the presence of God in the third verse of the book of Jonah.

³But Jonah ^erose to flee to ^fTarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to ^gJoppa and found a ship going to ^rTarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to ^rTarshish, ^haway from the presence of the LORD.

Children go hide from their parents when they are doing something they know they shouldn't. Adults, we tend to isolate ourselves and pull back from God's people, stop spending time in prayer and in the scriptures, when we are living in unrepentant sin. Sin has a cost and that cost is a loss of nearness to God. We recognize this pattern. The younger son does what we all would do, he runs away. He's determined to live his own life, and make his own choices, and be his own boss; but far removed from the presence of his father.

And verse 13 goes on to tell us that after he went into that far country,

he squandered his property in ^oreckless living.

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We don't know for sure how he squandered his money. His older brother later suggests that he spent at least a portion of it on female company. Whether that's true or the older brother is merely surmising we aren't told. What we do know is that he foolishly blew through his portion of the inheritance in pursuit of a good time. "It's good to be my own boss! I can do what I want, I can spend what I want, I can enjoy what I want, no matter the consequences." The details of how he spent his money are unimportant. What is important is that when we live in sin and rebellion against God, our eyesight is focused on the here and now, the fleeting, the momentary, here today and gone tomorrow. And we have no eyes for the future, for the the eternal. How could we? We love ourselves and we love our sin.

Verses 14 and 15 tell us that after he had gone through all his money, there was a famine in whichever land he was in. And having no money, no food, he found "one of the citizens of that country" (a gentile) who hired him to look after the pigs. Again, the Jewish listeners would've recoiled at this. In the Levitical Law, pigs are unclean animals (Lev 11:7). To touch a pig would make a person unclean. A Jew who was unclean was an outcast, an untouchable. People would avoid them because physical contact would make them unclean as well.

I think Jesus is driving home a point here. Remember, he's addressing the pharisees' grumbling. He is painting a vivid picture for the pharisees using a parable, a story, of a younger son who is a sinner worthy of being stoned to death, a profligate (reckless fool), an untouchable (unclean). This is a man the pharisees would scorn, they would despise, they would see him as the lowest of the low. But Jesus is not done with his story.

Verse 16 goes on to say:

¹⁶ And he ^pwas longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

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¹⁷“But ^qwhen he ^rcame to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, ^sI have sinned against ^theaven and before you. ¹⁹^uI am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰And he arose and came to his father.

For whatever reason, only God knows, not every sinner has to be brought to the point of “rock bottom” before God gets their attention, before their hearts are softened even just a little bit to the truth. But many believers certainly have that testimony. This younger son hit rock bottom. He was out feeding the pigs and he was starving such that he longed to eat what the pigs were eating. And in the worst moment of his life, he “came to himself”. Another way we might put this is he had an aha moment, his eyes were opened. And in this moment of clarity his understanding shifts. Before, he couldn’t wait to get away from his father, maybe he viewed him as oppressive, maybe he found his father’s oversight tedious. But in his aha moment it occurred to him that his father was caring and generous. “Even my father’s servants have more than enough bread.” And he didn’t demand to be taken back even as a servant. His approach was repentant. He planned out what he was going to say. He recognized his sin against his father and against God. His arrogance was replaced with humility, with meekness. His initial “Give me what’s mine” became instead “treat me as a servant”.

Then we get to the really good part of the story of the younger son, because we get to shift our focus from the son to the father. He left that far country to return to his father’s land, (v20)

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ^vran and ^wembraced him and ^xkissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ^uI am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ³ ²²But the father said to his servants, ⁴ ‘Bring quickly ^ythe best robe, and put it on him,

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and put ^za ring on his hand, and ^ashoes on his feet. ²³And bring ^bthe fattened calf and kill it, and ^clet us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son ^dwas dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran” to him. This shows us the heart of the father, and thus the heart of God. God cares deeply for the lost. In that culture, it would’ve been unseemly for an older man to run. Men wore robes, and to run, the father would have needed to gather his robe up in his hands. It would have been humiliating to run. And yet, Jesus told his listeners that the father ran to his son. He suffered humiliation to run, to seek after and show love to his son. Luke 19:10 tells us:

¹⁰For ^mthe Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

In the parable of the lost sheep that we read through earlier, note in verse 4 that the shepherd goes after the one sheep that is lost, (until he gets tired of searching). No! He goes after the one that is lost, until he finds it.

Likewise, in the parable of the lost coin, the woman seeks diligently for her lost coin until she finds it.

In a sermon titled *Prodigal Love for the Prodigal Son*, Charles Spurgeon says this.

“I do not know that the prodigal saw his father, but his father saw him. The eyes of mercy are quicker than the eyes of repentance. Even the eyes of our faith is dim compared with the eye of God's love. He sees a sinner long before a sinner sees Him.

I do not suppose that the prodigal travelled very fast. I should imagine that he came very slowly— He was resolve to come, yet he was half afraid. But we read that his father ran. Slow are the steps of repentance, but swift are the feet of forgiveness. God can run where

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we scarcely limp, and if we are limping towards Him, He will run towards us.”

The father ran to his son and embraced him and kissed him. He threw his arms unreservedly around the neck of his sinner, untouchable, unclean, fool of a son and kissed him, showing complete and unrestrained forgiveness. The son began his speech of confession to his father, and his father cut him off, he didn't even let him finish, so complete was the forgiveness. The father ordered that his finest clothes be brought for the son and a ring for his hand and shoes for his feet restoring in an instant the son's place as a son in his father's house. And he threw a huge party, killing the fattened calf and brought the son into celebration. Oh, what grace. It is important to note here that in this parable, being in the celebration seems to equate to being redeemed. The younger son repented, confessed, was forgiven (actually, he was forgiven, then he confessed), and the father brought him into celebration. So being in celebration means the younger son has been found, he is no longer lost. However, being outside of the celebration equates to lostness. We'll see that with the older son, the second of the two lost sons, in these next verses. Starting in verse 25:

²⁵“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷And 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.’ ²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

So the older son came up to the house after a day of work and sees that there is a party (celebration) going on in the house. And instead of going in to see why this party was happening and to join the celebration, he instead called out a servant. And when he heard why the celebration was taking place he was angry. And the father went out to his older son.

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Again, the father is seeking after a lost son. He leaves the party, he leaves his guests, he leaves the music and dancing, he leaves the son that has just come home and entreated him to come in and join the celebration. The older son was lost, he was outside the celebration, and the father went to his older son, just like he did his younger son. And pay close attention to the language the older son used with his father.

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 ^ecelebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured ^gyour property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, ^hyou are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting ^eto celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

He did not address his father with the deserved respect, “father”, but with hostility, “look”. And see how the son describes his relationship with his father? I have **served** you. Your **commands**. The son views this as a master/slave-type relationship. He clearly has no love for his father, but sees him as a task master, dishing out commands to be served. And yet Jesus says in Matthew 20 verse 28:

the Son of Man came not to be served but ^kto serve, and ^lto give his life as a ransom for ^mmany.”

The older son has a mindset that he is serving his father, and earning his inheritance (that he is **owed** his inheritance) because of his work and obedience. And where we saw the younger son have a similar negative view of his father and respond by rebelling and running away - being very, very bad; in contrast we see that the older son has responded to this perception of the father by being dutiful and obeying the commands - being very, very good. Isaiah 64:6 says:

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⁶ ^v We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (or filthy rag).

“I have never disobeyed your commands”, filthy rags. He had no love for his father. He did not have nearness to his father. He did not cherish being with his father, he did not treasure getting to have dinners with his father. He did not bask in the goodness, the kindness, the strength and wisdom of his father. He just wanted to serve his father the task-master until he could get his fathers stuff. He was a lost son, outside the celebration, clinging to his self-proclaimed righteousness.

Now, we have to be careful in dealing with the response from the father here. When he says “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours”, it sounds like the language of the redeemed. But in the context of Jesus’ response to the pharisees we know that it is not, because this older son represents the pharisees. So what exactly does it mean? Tim Keller suggests that this language doesn’t actually have any deeper theological meaning, but rather is meant to be taken literally in the story. The father had divided his assets and given his younger son his portion. Literally, all that remains belongs to the older son as his inheritance: “all I have is yours”. The older son was a recipient of common grace, that grace we all see in the good things of life whether we are followers of Christ or not, but he was not the recipient of redeeming, or saving, grace.

We don’t know how the older son’s story ends. Jesus ends it there, a massive cliff hanger. We don’t know if he too repents, or if he continues in his dutifully lost way.

Closing -

Which son are you? Are you the younger son after he has returned home, the sinner who has repented and come into celebration with the Father? Hallelujah! Or maybe you’re the younger son feeding the pigs; you see clearly that you are a sinner, but you are still a long way off. The good news is that the Father has seen you where you are and has run to

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you by sending his son to this earth. Jesus died, enduring the wrath of God, for sin, on your behalf, was buried, and 3 days later was raised to life, forever defeating sin and death.

¹⁸For Christ also ^msuffered² ⁿonce for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, ^othat he might bring us to God, being put to death ^pin the flesh but made alive ^qin the spirit (1 Peter 3:18)

And if you repent, he throws his arms around you and kisses you, forgiving completely all your sin, your pride, your rebellion, and He clothes you as a son or a daughter with the best robe, and a ring for your hand, and shoes for your feet.

⁴But³ God, being ^rrich in mercy, ^sbecause of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even ^twhen we were dead in our trespasses, ^umade us alive together with Christ—^vby grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and ^wseated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable ^xriches of his grace in ^ykindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

If this is you, what are you waiting for? Turn from your sin and your pursuit of satisfaction from a world that is here today and gone tomorrow, and come in to celebration with the Father.

Or are you the older son? Do you cling to some perception of righteousness of your own? If in your heart of hearts you say, “I try really hard to be good, I try to help other people, I go to church, I was baptized, I prayed a prayer; therefore, God, you owe it to me to answer my prayers, to give me a relatively good life, and to let me into Heaven when I die...” If this is the language of your heart, then Jesus is your model, Jesus is your example, Jesus may even be your boss, but Jesus is not your Savior. You’re trying to be your own savior. There’s nothing you can do to earn your way. There’s no negotiating with God on the Day of

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Judgement, “God, look at all that I have done. Did I not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do mighty works in your name?” He will reply to you, depart from me, I never knew you.”
(Matthew 7:22-23, paraphrase)

If this is you let go of your perceived righteousness you cling to, stop looking to your own works to save you, stop believing that you’re good enough because you were raised in church and even baptized, or because you have superior theology. These things won’t save you. Run to the Father, and go with Him into the celebration.

“Nothing in my hands I bring
Simply to the cross I cling”