

**Luke 15:1-32 (NASB)** Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. <sup>2</sup>Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup>So He told them this parable, saying, <sup>4</sup>“What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>“When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup>“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ <sup>7</sup>“I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

<sup>8</sup>“Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>“When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’ <sup>10</sup>“In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

<sup>11</sup>And He said, “A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup>“The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. <sup>13</sup>“And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. <sup>14</sup>“Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. <sup>15</sup>“So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup>“And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving *anything* to him. <sup>17</sup>“But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! <sup>18</sup>‘I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”” <sup>20</sup>“So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; <sup>23</sup>and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>“Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>“And he summoned one of the servants and *began* inquiring what these things could be. <sup>27</sup>“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.’ <sup>28</sup>“But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out

and *began* pleading with him. <sup>29</sup>“But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and *yet* you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; <sup>30</sup>but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup>“And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>‘But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was lost* and has been found.’”

- These parables:
  - The Seeking Shepherd
  - The Searching Woman (Foraging Female)
  - The Loving Father (Adoring Abba)
- Instead of beginning, “What man of you” verse 11 begins “A certain man had two sons”
  - This prevents the audience from immediately identifying with the man.

### **Line 1: (vs 11-12)**

<sup>11</sup>And He said, “A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup>“The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them.

- The father is obviously a man of wealth
- By dividing his property, the father chances the loss of his honor, his position, his support, his control.
  - His honor depends on being the family’s support and representative.
    - Family members are deeply embedded in each other socially, economically, and psychologically
    - Any member acting outside the pattern of the family is deeply resented.
  - The ancient Mediterranean world was socially and geographically immobile, so the family and village were “closed” social networks.
    - A family that lost its place in the village was excluded from economic and social relations and no one would marry its sons or daughters.
  - The younger son has no shame or family loyalty.
  - Neither does the elder who took his share as well.
  - The father is also suspect because he gives in without protest.

- Villagers would have been dumbfounded.
  - Could this family continue to exist?
  - The villagers would close ranks against this family to keep the contagion at bay.
  - The family was not only crumbling in every way.
- The younger son has in effect pronounced his father dead.
  - “If you won’t hurry up and die, give me what’s coming now.”
  - We may even wonder what’s wrong with the father that his son is so desperate to leave.

### Line 2: (vs 13)

<sup>13</sup>“And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

- We don’t know exactly what the son did with his inheritance.
- “Gathering everything together” and “[going] on a journey” means the son has left the family.
  - “A distant country” can only mean a Gentile country with pagan values and loose morals.
  - It is obvious the son’s “squandering” was self-destructive.

### Line 3: (vs 14-16)

<sup>14</sup>“Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. <sup>15</sup>“So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup>“And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving *anything* to him.

- Life doesn’t turn out well for the prodigal son.
  - He completely moves outside his own family and tribe for help and becomes a slave to a Gentile and forced to feed pigs.
  - He left the father, and it ruined his life.
    - *Our own independence is self-destructive.*
- Had Jesus stopped at this point, his critics would have risen up with enthusiastic approval.

- **“That’s right. That’s what happens to a sinner. He ends up with the stench of pigs upon him. He got what he deserved.”**
- Pharisees were content to leave sinners in the pigpen.
- The Savior wants them to find the way back to the Father’s house
- The son has abandoned his humanity and become like an animal.
  - He is reduced to desiring pig’s slop.

#### **Line 4: (vs 17-20a)**

<sup>17</sup>“But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ <sup>20a</sup>“So he got up and came to his father.

- We expected the son to come to his senses.
- His compels him to return, and his humanity is the first thing that is restored.
  - Too bad he had to experience the pigpen to understand the glory of the Father’s house.
- When the younger son took possession of his inheritance he stepped out of the fullness of his father’s house and entered the emptiness of “loose living.”
  - God’s grace awakens us to our need and that awakening is the first step toward our repentance and recovery.
- The “good” is still symbolized by food.
  - The hired hands have bread while wayward sons perish in famine.
    - The son decides to become a hired hand, and become entitled to bread.
    - He can no longer be a son, because he has forfeited those rights.
  - The son understood his father to be one who feeds because he has never known his father to do otherwise.
- His sin is twofold.
  - By attaching himself to a foreigner and feeding pigs he has abrogated Judaism-his religion.
    - The loss of his inheritance is a sin before his father, for he will be unable to carry out his responsibility to take care of the old man and fulfill his familial responsibility.

- The younger son's proposal indicates that, while he desires the father's house, he doesn't understand the father's heart.
  - He expects things to be earned therefore he will earn his bread as a hired hand.
    - This is works righteousness.
- The younger son's return seems motivated primarily by his stomach rather than a desire to rejoin the family.
  - Motion toward the father rescues the son from foreign domination.
    - Restoration to the tribe is the second thing that is restored.

### Line 5: (vs 20b)

**20b** while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

- The father bridges the gap between himself and his son.
  - The father goes overboard and his behavior is an embarrassment in the village.
- The younger son's actions were the talk of the town, and he knew that going home meant running a gauntlet of criticism and hostility.
  - To come home bearing the smell of pigs and wearing the rags of failure was the ultimate humiliation.
  - Kenneth Bailey:
    - "The father also knows how the village will treat the boy on his arrival. The prodigal will be mocked by a crowd that will gather spontaneously as word flashes across the village telling of his return...he will be subject to taunt songs and many other types of verbal and perhaps even physical abuse."
- The Greek we translate as "run" means to 'exert oneself to the limit of one's powers"
  - It implies straining to the utmost
  - Obviously the father acts in this way because the boy is in trouble.
  - The villagers would be angry and the father's compassion is well placed.
    - In this case the embrace and kiss are not at all signs of welcome but signs of protection.
- A Mediterranean audience might have expected instead to see the father beat the son in public in order to signal his disapproval.
  - The villagers disapprove of both the son and the father.

- When the villagers had criticized the wayward son, they had been warm, no doubt, in their praise of the dutiful son.
  - He was a credit to his father, the one who had done the right thing.

### Line 6: (vs 21)

<sup>21</sup>“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”

- Now the wayward son proposes terms for his restoration as a hired hand.

### Line 7: (vs 22-24)

<sup>22</sup>“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; <sup>23</sup>and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

- The father commands his slaves to carry out orders that restore the son to the status of son, not to the status of a hired servant.
  - Family is the third thing restored to him.
  - The best robe must surely be that of the father own festival robe reserved for grand occasions.
    - “Bring forth the best robe,” all the marks of the far country must be covered
  - The ring, probably a signet ring, gives the son power and status.
  - For servants to place sandals on the son’s feet indicates his superiority over them.
- His dead son is alive — a resurrection of sorts.
  - There was no word of sharp reproof, no making sure of a sufficient sense of guilt, no requirement of probation, no executive order to wear a mask.
- The father and son have also offended the community.
  - Something must be done to re-establish confidence in the entire family by demonstrating its respect for and solidarity with the village.
- Here the father takes the necessary action to reconcile himself and the family with the village.
  - To kill a calf is rare and expensive.
    - Not to share it with the neighbors would add insult to injury.
  - By making the first move toward the village, the father risks a disastrous rejection.

- When the villagers do indeed show up, the hearer would be much relieved that the desired reconciliation had succeeded.
- The story would seem to be resolved.

### Line 8: (vs 25-26)

<sup>25</sup>“Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>“And he summoned one of the servants and *began* inquiring what these things could be.

- How is it possible that the elder son would be uninformed of the younger’s return, the father’s welcome, and the feast?
  - The son “is in the field” away from the father and yet still at home.
    - In the Cain story, the Esau story, the Joseph story, the David story, and in the parable, “the field” is that place of autonomous functioning, reserved for elder sons, that is both out of sight of the father but within the scope of his assumed desire.
    - The reference to the son as “elder” echoes the elder-verses-younger-brother stories where the elder brother is uptight and the least favorite.
  - The son draws near but does not enter.

### Line 9: (vs 28)

<sup>28</sup>“But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him.

- Up to this point the daring but generous efforts of the father have succeeded in rescuing his beleaguered family.
- The older son’s refusal to come in is totally unexpected.
  - It is shocking.
  - It is a public humiliation of the family and the father.
- The contrast here is not between the two sons
- It is between the villagers and the older son
  - The contrast between the two sons took place earlier in the story when one asked for the inheritance, both took it, but only one left home.
- There was never any question of the younger son showing up at the party.
  - The doubt centers on the villagers and the older son.

- The music and dancing signal that the villagers have indeed arrived and affirmed the reconciliation.
  - The calf is for the villagers, not the prodigal son
  - It is a peace offering aimed at the community
  - If the older brother joins the party, it will also be for him because his place in the village has been restored as well
    - After all he took his share of the inheritance and thereby raised questions about his own familial loyalties.
    - We took our share of the inheritance in the Garden.
    - Genesis 1:5 “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”
- There is no doubt about the son’s duty here.
  - The oldest son should act as his father’s special assistant on such occasions, as a co-host.
- This is an insult to his father.
  - Publicly he makes clear his disapproval of his father’s actions.
- This son would rather not have fellowship with his father than accept his father’s treatment of his brother.
  - He will not accept someone who has been the companion of pigs and prostitutes.
  - If that costs him fellowship with his father, so be it.
- The prodigal’s loss of the money means the older brother will be the sole support of the father in his old age and likely of the prodigal son as well.
  - Yet a reconciliation between the brothers is essential to the well-being of all members of the family and indeed to its relations with the larger community.
  - Whatever tensions remain inside the family belong there and not in public.
    - But once again the public is drawn into the family quarrel.
    - The older son’s deliberate and public refusal to come to the party leaves no doubt he is trying to humiliate his father.
  - In the ancient middle east, old men did not ask their sons.
    - They ordered them.
    - To beg is demeaning and indicates a lack of shame.
- The father comes out of the house, just as he did at the approach of the younger son.



- But this son comes not as a humble prospective hired hand but as an arrogant elder brother whose refusal to eat with his father and brother shames them all.
- Just as the younger son cut himself off from the father in the beginning, so the elder's anger and refusal cut him off.
- The older son murmurs against the father's feast exactly as the scribes and pharisees of the primary story do against Jesus' feast with sinners.
  - The elder brother, the surrogate Pharisee, is offered no opportunity for repentance, and even more, there is no hint that he is to be rejected; he is after all the heir.
    - He rejects the grace the father offers.
      - Jonah 2:8 Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

### **Line 10: (vs 29-30)**

<sup>29</sup>“But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; <sup>30</sup>but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’

- The elder brother sees himself completely dependent on the father (I slaved).
- The younger has brought shame on the family by destroying the family life.
  - This is the great insult that, according to the elder, the younger has compounded by consorting with prostitutes, violating the family's bloodline.
- The elder son feels as though he is a faithful slave to the father, never breaking a commandment.
  - He hasn't stayed home because he loved his father, but because working in his fields was a way to get what he wanted.
- From the father's viewpoint, the younger son was lost and now is found.
  - The elder son has shared his father's house but not his father's heart.
  - “This son of yours” says volumes
    - He will not accept him as “my brother”
  - “All these years I've been slaving for you”
    - He knows nothing of the joy of being a son.
    - The younger brother was willing to become a servant; the elder brother has been one in heart all along

- This respectable elder son is, in fact, a rebel, lost in his father's house.
- In effect, "We had to celebrate and be glad; we had no choice. Because I rejoice over lost sons who return. Joy is the only possibility. Not to rejoice would be to deny who I am."

### **Line 11: (vs 31-32)**

<sup>31</sup>"And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.  
<sup>32</sup>'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.*'"

- The final line unfolds the father's view of his elder son.
  - Where the son saw himself as a faithful slave, the father views him as a companion (always with me) and co-owner of the farm (all that is mine is yours)
  - Thus the elder fails to recognize that the father is always on his side and he doesn't need to earn his father's approval.
  - He has made himself a slave for something that was already his.
- The elder son would not share a roof with his brother.
- By that act, he was denying himself entrance to his father's house.
- Jesus was giving the scribes and Pharisees this message:
  - "God has welcomed sinners. If you refuse to sit at the table with them, you are keeping yourselves out of God's house."

### **Conclusion:**

- The parable's ending leaves the hearer without an ending
  - Does the elder son go in or stay out?
    - The villagers confirmed that the younger son was really in.
    - The older son is out
      - He is completely disloyal
  - The younger son is adorned with the signs of restoration and feasting on the fatted calf, but the elder possesses all the property.
    - At the father's death, will the younger become the elder's slave?
  - The elder son's fate is not like Esau's: he is not hated, nor does the younger receive the elder's portion.
    - Actually the elder is the heir: "All that is mine is yours"

- Nor is he banished: “I am always with you.”
- This parable subverts the idea that the kingdom decides between the chosen and the rejected.
  - Here the father rejects no one; both are chosen
- Even more is at stake.
  - The younger son violates the moral code and gets a feast; the elder rejects the father but gets it all.
  - The father is interested neither in morality nor inheritance.
    - He is concerned with the unity of his sons.
    - Psalm 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brothers to dwell together in unity!
- In the parable the kingdom is not something that decides between but something that unifies.
- The parable radically rejects Israel’s self-understanding of itself as the favored, younger son.
- All people are called, regardless of what is required of them.
  - To reject the Father’s gracious treatment of the most unworthy of sinners is to deceive ourselves about our need for grace and to forfeit the fellowship with God that is based on grace alone.
  - Grace offends a sense of fairness.
  - Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing?
    - Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not a fatted calf
      - In sackcloth, not a new robe
      - Wearing ashes, not a new ring
      - In tears, not in merriment
      - Kneeling, not dancing
    - We might even wonder, if we had lived next door, would we have attended that party?
  - The father not only had two sons, but loved two sons, went out to two sons, and was generous to two sons.
    - God’s love is both/and, not either/or

- The embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not at all negate love of Pharisees and scribes — but they must come into the banquet.
- We find it difficult not to be offended by God's grace toward another, especially if we have serious questions about that person's conduct and character.
- What we know of God is seen in how we view ourselves as lost and how we deal with others as lost.
- God's heart aches over those who are lost:
  - God's heart rejoices over those who are found.
  - How well we know Him is revealed by whether or not we ache and rejoice as He does