

The Two Lost Sons
Luke 15:11-32
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What is this parable, arguably one of the most famous and commonly read parable of Jesus today, doing in a sermon series on the neglected people and passages of scripture?

I grew up knowing the parable of the prodigal son. It was drawn on overheads, played out on felt boards, and acted out in Sunday School. I always knew the dangers of wandering away from the God's house. It was dangerous and strange out there.

But we almost always ignored the older son. The one who is standing outside the tent, listening to the laughter and the celebration of the return of the prodigal. The one who stayed. The faithful one. The responsible one.

After all, through the eyes of the eldest son, the story takes on a different cast.

Understand the parable.

First things first. Why did Jesus tell this story in the first place. To find that out, we look at Luke 15:1-2. Here we read,

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable. . .”

In fact, Jesus doesn't share one parable, but three of them. Three is an important number in Jewish culture, because their wisdom says that once can be chance, twice can be a coincidence, but three times is the minimum number needed to establish a pattern. And these three parables work together to establish a pattern. Something gets lost. It has valuable such that a person searches for it until it is found. When it is found, they invite their community to rejoice and celebrate with them.

The third of the parables, the lost sons, is really an expansion on the first two, those of the lost sheep and the lost coin. It makes it really personal.

Whenever I study a parable, I always like to picture it in my head, and try to get a feel for what it would be like to hear the story from the lips of a master story-teller like Jesus. So imagine with me:

The youngest son is one in this culture with no position or authority. The eldest son is the one who will take over the family when the father passes on. The younger one is in a position of humility, yet still a son. He will inherit a portion of the estate, while the eldest would inherit a double portion.

But this son is not content with his lot in life, and does something rash. He speaks the unspeakable: Give me my share of the inheritance. This is the same thing as telling your parent that you wish they were dead already, so that you could get on with living your life. The youngest son is ready to pretend that his father is already dead, and wants his independence. Against all logic, the father gives the son his wish.

As I picture the son walking away from the family farm, his steps are jaunty, his head is held high. He wears fine clothes and solid sandals on his feet, the mark of a person with at least modest wealth, and position within the community. Turning his back on family, culture, and home, he sets of to discover what he can.

And what he discovers is death, at every level of his being. His body is dying, as he starves. His religion is dying, as he lives with and eats with pigs, unclean animals according to the Old Testament law. His relationships die, as he finds himself alone, and a foreigner living in risk and vulnerability.

Friends, as I heard once at a conference, when we pretend that God our Father is dead, it is not God that dies, but we do. We experience independence from God, the source of life, and what we discover is death at many levels.

And so this lost, wandering son turns his face back towards home. All the way home, for each step of the long journey, he repeats his repentance plea,

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.”

How different is the walk of the younger son as he approaches the family farm. His once fine clothes are ragged and filthy. His sandals are long gone, and his stomach is empty. His head hangs low in shame, his anxiety mounts as home comes into view. How will the Father react? What will the outcome be? It is only desperation that moves him forward, and he repeats his opening line.

“Father , I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.”

How many of you have seen your father run? I can count the number of times I saw my dad run on one hand. In this culture, fathers were stately, calm, and somewhat majestic. They moved through life with the honor of one who has lived life, has wisdom, and is given respect. People go to them, they don't go to people. They especially do not rush to embrace a disrespectful, arrogant, wasteful former son.

The son looks up, and his father has hiked his robes up, exposing himself shamefully in his rush. He is running full on. At the extreme edges, many emotions look the same. Anger, fear, joy, pain. Given his last spoken words to his father were the most shameful possible, I think that at this moment the son expects to be rejected, likely struck, maybe worse. His father is running out to him in extreme emotion. So he opens with his line.

And he doesn't even get it finished. The Father, again, against all reason and custom, restores his son to the family, welcoming him in a way that he never dreamed of, and invites together the household and the community to celebrate his return.

Lost, found celebrate. The pattern holds true.

Imagine the tax collectors hearing this. Sinners, traitors, and hustlers all, they hear that God is not waiting to smite them like a mighty smiter, but instead longs to run to them, gather them in, and celebrate, because they have learned that life outside the kingdom of God is not life at all, but death at every level. All they need do is return to God.

But not everyone is happy!

The eldest son knows none of this. He's been out in the field, hard at work, tending the family farm, organizing, working, planting and harvesting. He's been doing the work of two since the worthless one — he won't call him brother after what he did — left. Sun up to sun down, his life is toil, sweat and resentment. When he finishes his work for the day, he comes home to find a feast laid on.

And it is for the worthless one. Father has just opened his arms, and brought him back in, just like that.

And the resentment boils over. He can't take it. He refuses to celebrate. He won't eat. He sits down right where he is, outside the house of his father.

Isn't that interesting to note? The eldest son is now the one who is outside the home of his father. All that he works for, all that he strives for, is inside that house. His father, his family, his community, rich food, joy and celebration, yet he's outside the house, angry.

Friends, there is more than one way to squander the rich inheritance of the kingdom of God! One way, the way that we usually talk about, is to turn your back on God, to pretend or believe that God does not exist, or is dead, or doesn't care. We already know that this leads to death. Yet, the eldest son, the one who inherits all that the Father has, is as outside the home as surely as the younger son, but it is by his own choice to vent his anger, and give resentment to his bitterness over the younger son's reception, rather than the Father's choice to lock the door against him.

The eldest son can't believe what is happening because the youngest son has done nothing to deserve being part of the family. In fact, he's done everything he can to deserve a special place in hell. The eldest son has misunderstood the nature of belonging to the Father's family — that it is something earned.

Look at the words that he uses: "I've been slaving for you." The youngest son knows a thing or two about slaving. The eldest son knows nothing about isolation, not belonging, being a foreigner, and vulnerable, and desperate. But he does know anger.

"You wouldn't even give me a young goat." The implication is that he did give away his wealth to his younger son to celebrate, and he's giving away his wealth to celebrate the return of the worthless one, but celebration is not available for the eldest son.

"This son of yours." Not "my brother," not a name. All ties, all bonds of family, are severed to this son.

Remarkably, the father comes out of the celebration to meet his other son. Just like he accepted the shame of running, of baring his legs and more in his haste to meet the son who shamed him beyond bearing, now he leaves his guests, his home, and his role as host, and walks into the shame of another obstinate son. A son who won't come in and eat, who won't accept his Father's grace, who claims his father's shame is too great for him, the son, to bear. Yet the father goes out to meet him, the same way that he went to meet the younger.

Imagine now the Pharisees hearing this. They can't bear the shame of being related by blood to many of the tax collectors. They assume the indignity of people who should know better behaving so badly. And they spend their entire lives trying to make up for the shortfall created in society by those people, so that Messiah will come and save God's people from the heavy burden of Roman occupation. The work is hard, and endless. The shame and the anger are real enough to stone people to death.

And they hear that their anger, their resentment, their misunderstanding is isolating them from the heart of the kingdom of God. Yet God reaches out to them too. The problem is, they will have to celebrate someone that they have come to loathe.

Lost, found, celebrate.

As has been said before, this isn't a story about one prodigal son, but about two lost sons.

And that isn't accurate, really, either.

While it is built around the sons, this parable is centered fully on the gracious Father, and his invitation to the lostness of his boys.

Interesting lessons start to show up when we start to ask ourselves, what do we learn about God through the Father?

We learn that God is relentless in his pursuit of us. All the way through scripture we learn about the tenacious character of God in his pursuit of creation. Friends, I've said it before, but it bears repetition. We know the end of the story. History marches towards a determined end, a destiny. And that destiny is all things, in heaven and on earth, brought into unity under Jesus Christ. God is relentless, in other words, he will never stop, in his movement towards that end. The Father will not allow either son to believe a lie. The younger son is not allowed to believe that he is anything other than a beloved son of the Father. The elder son is not allowed to believe that he is merely a servant, nor brother-less. God tells us truth that we do not want to hear, that we desperately want to hear, because that is how this story ends. Never. Stop. God is relentless.

God is also extravagant. Look around us, as creation declares the glory of the creator God! God surrounds us with indications of his goodness, his provision, his gift of life. All of creation points to the goodness of God. And he gives it to us. Freely. Without strings. Without earning. His most extravagant gift, that of Jesus, given freely of himself, for us. God is extravagant in his celebration, as all of creation comes into life under the power and name of Jesus. Even more, God uses resources at an incredible rate in his pursuit of us. He sends us, asks us to give our time, our money, our houses, our family, or our lives, in pursuit of those who don't know the goodness of our God. He asks us to give as though what we have isn't really ours in the first place! Hint: it all comes from him, because he has extravagantly given it to us! God is indeed extravagant.

Finally, God is shameless. The father in this parable runs, in a culture where the patriarch is stately, respected, and honored. People come to him, he doesn't go to people. Yet the father runs. He hikes up his robes in a most undignified manner, because nothing will stop him from collecting his son in his arms, and making him safe, providing for him, loving him. He goes out of the party, into the dark night, away from guest and family and food, into the cold, to find another boy, sitting petulantly on the ground. He humbles himself, invites, cajoles, pleads, even.

Lost. Found. Celebrate.

But does the pattern hold true?

Does the eldest son go into the party? Does he accept the invitation?

We don't know.

And here lies the hook in this story.

We are the sons in the story. Humanity was created to be in relationship with God Almighty, the Father, the creator. But some among us act as though God is dead. We are relentless in our pursuit of desire, extravagant in our selfishness, and shameless in our appetites. Yet God longs for us.

We are indignant, often, with each other. We divide the mass of humanity into categories, us and them, and assume that we are the ones who have it right. When we discover that God has open arms to all who repent and believe in Jesus, we cry foul. Surely we won't share the kingdom with those people? And so we refuse the inheritance that is ours, we isolate ourselves, and remain outside the kingdom in our pride.

Yet God comes out to us.

God came to us in Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago, when he suffered, died, and rose again from the dead. He came to unify all things in heaven and on earth under himself, his goodness, his offer of full, complete, life. All we need to do is accept that life happens God's way, not our way.

The question that this parable asks us is simply this: Will you accept the kingdom on God's terms, or will you stick with your own ideas, and stay outside the Father's celebration?