

## Scripture Reading for Sunday March 31<sup>st</sup> 2019

### Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32 (NIV)

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> “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. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> “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! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. “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. <sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> “But 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. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> 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.’”

## Sermon: The Parable of the Man with Two Sons

Today's well-known parable begins with, "There was a man who had two sons<sup>1</sup>," and while it has become known as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son,"<sup>2</sup> this is a misnomer. In fact, the climax of the story is *not* about him. There are *three* characters in the parable and the hero is the unconventional Father, *not* the prodigal – a word, incidentally, that means "wasteful" or "recklessly extravagant." This parable has been described as 'the best short-story in the world,' and it's certainly a captivating tale that draws us in. Parables in general are highly-memorable stories with a deeper meaning and an implied message that discerning listeners could often recognize for themselves.<sup>3</sup> They were a common feature of rabbinical teaching and so it is no surprise Jesus used this medium to communicate profound truths about life, faith, and the nature and purposes of God. Some stories were later interpreted by Jesus - or by the gospel writer - so we can explicitly see the point that was being implied; some stories, like this one, were not.<sup>4</sup> Even so, I will argue later that the message was abundantly clear! Let's begin by briefly outlining this *shocking* story.

"The younger son said to his father: 'Give me my share of the estate.'"<sup>5</sup> Under Jewish law, a father could retire and divide his estate. The older brother would get twice<sup>6</sup> that given to the younger brother and the father would be free to live comfortably on the property until he died. But that *isn't* what precipitates the father dividing his estate here. The rebellious younger son wanted his portion of his inheritance now, and this is the one of the story's shocking elements which would have stunned the audience. The son is personally rejecting his father, along with the family business, and abandoning his expected duty to care for his dad in his old age. This request is effectively saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead!" It's deplorable! The fact that the father agreed to the younger son's request is even more surprising; the audience would have expected the father to beat the son and throw him out!

The son evidently turns his portion into cash and then, to make his shameful action worse, he later squanders it on "wild living" in a far-away land.<sup>7</sup> His new lifestyle consumed him. Eventually he loses everything: his money, his family, his friends, his dignity, even his faith. For a Jew to work for a pig farmer meant he could not fall any further from grace. Yet it was in the mire of the pig-pen, where he

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction identifies siblings as "sons," *not* "brothers." This stresses their relationship with their father, but leaves open their relationship with each other. To some of Christ's audience, this may have brought to mind the stories of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and Jacob and Esau - not to forget Joseph and his older brothers.

<sup>2</sup> This title is due to the preceding two parables being known as "The Lost Sheep" (15:3-7) and "The Lost Coin" (15:8-10), hence "The *Lost* Son" (Luke 15:11-32; that latter title is inappropriate because *both* sons were lost! This is a story about *broken* relationships and about relationships being restored. It also provides far more detail than the other two stories; in particular it tells us more of the nature of the Father.) In all three stories, what is lost is found and celebrated with joy! This last parable *amplifies* the previous two. (Note only Luke presents this parable.)

<sup>3</sup> Some parables were more cryptic and Jesus needed to later explain them to his followers, privately; see Matt 13:1-42.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, some parables have multiple themes and others serve to illustrate just one small point. It is therefore inappropriate to interpret them out of context or to see them as a *rigorous*, point-by-point analogy.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 15:12a. (In 12b, the father divided his "property" – literally, *bios*, or life.)

<sup>6</sup> Deut 21:17.,

<sup>7</sup> Luke 15:13. "Far-away land" implies a Gentile or non-Jewish land.

could sink no lower than eating the pig food,<sup>8</sup> that – we are told - “he came to himself” and uttered the word, “Father.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, the son realised he no longer had any claim on his father’s goods, and morally he had no right to be even called a ‘son,’ but just maybe – if he was contrite enough - his father would allow him to become one of the servants. And so he heads toward his father, practicing his little speech! Cynically, we could suggest that this is simple pragmatism on behalf of the younger son and not necessarily genuine love for his father. But the parable tells us that it is more than that, as the son recognises, “He as sinned against God and against his father.”<sup>10</sup> In coming to his senses he realises that he has both violated some divine moral code and badly mistreated his father. His turning around from the life he was living and his moving back towards his father was an active sign of *repentance*.

What happens next is also shocking! The waiting father recognised his son returning while he was a long way off and ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him.<sup>11</sup> In ancient Palestine, no grown man would ever *run*; that was seen as undignified. Yet the father, moved by compassion, set propriety aside and ran to welcome his son home. The father quickly and publicly restores sonship to him; the robe stands for honour, the ring, authority, and the sandals mean he wasn’t a slave.<sup>12</sup> And then the lavish celebrations begin.<sup>13</sup> The forgiving father says one of the key lines in the parable, “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”<sup>14</sup>

But the story does not end there, as “the man had *two* sons.” The older one was the dutiful, obedient son, who has been silent in the story up until this point.<sup>15</sup> When he hears about the party and the reason for it, he becomes *angry* and *refuses* to join in.<sup>16</sup> For the second time in the story, the father leaves the house to meet a wayward son, in this case to plead with him. The eldest son goes on an indignant and disrespectful rant and speaks of “this son of yours,” rather than “my brother.”<sup>17</sup> The father replies, “My *son*, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The carob pods that the pigs ate were indeed animal fodder, but desperate humans would eat them in times of famine.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 15:17.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 15:21. (“heaven” equals “God.”) He returns *not* with expectations of forgiveness or honours, but with the simple hope that he will be treated fairly.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 15:20; see also Gen 33:4.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 15:22.

<sup>13</sup> Meat was not part of the daily diet and was normally reserved for special festivals. This was an occasion to celebrate!

<sup>14</sup> Luke 15:24. This evokes leaving Egypt for the Promised Land, and returning from the Exile. It also speaks of resurrection! Once Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners when they had finally been defeated and return to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected Lincoln would take up dire vengeance, but he replied, “I will treat them as if they had never been away.”

<sup>15</sup> There is no mention of him trying the talk his younger brother out of his decision, nor any attempt to rescue him!

<sup>16</sup> Luke 15:25-28.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 15:30.

<sup>18</sup> In a sense, this is literally true because the father had already divided his inheritance between the two sons and all that is remaining technically belonged to the older son.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 15:31-32.

As with many parables, the story ends and we have lots of unanswered questions. What happens next? Does the older son accept his younger brother?<sup>20</sup> Does the younger son continue to honour his father – or is this a passing phase? We don't know. But the father's patience, forgiveness, generosity, and joy are important, yet shocking, features of the story, as it is all too common to perceive God a mean-spirited or as distant and uncaring. This story emphasises the loving kindness and grace of God toward two ungrateful children. He genuinely delights and welcomes all who seek him<sup>21</sup> and he gives us far more than we deserve. Sometimes, in our darkest moments, we forget that this is what God is like.

While the story reveals God's nature through the actions and speeches of the father, there is still more to it than that. Earlier, Luke tells us that despised "tax collectors<sup>22</sup> and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. However, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law grumbled, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"<sup>23</sup> It is in this social context that Jesus tells the parable and, in light of that, we can't help but make the connection between the two brothers and the two groups of people present. And, because *we are also* drawn into the narrative, the implied question is, "To which brother are you (and I) most alike?"

Consider the younger son. What is at the heart of his initial desire? He is saying to his father, "I don't need you" or "I want to be free of your authority." This is a reminder of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis who, in the Garden of Eden, said to God, "I want to be independent now." "I want to be free to make the decisions and choices affecting my life."<sup>24</sup> The young man wanted the gifts, the inheritance, but not the Giver. He wanted freedom, but the irony was that, in the end, it brought him bondage. The hardest words to say are "I'm sorry, I was wrong" – no wonder the young man practiced his speech! It is often said, "The most difficult step is the first one." Pride can keep us from admitting our mistakes. Note, however, that the father is not found sitting on the deck thinking, "Boy, your story had better be good!" No, most unexpectedly, the younger son is *restored* into a loving relationship with his father.<sup>25</sup> In response to the young man's act of *repentance*, he receives *forgiveness*. The son finally recognises that home is not *place*; it is a *relationship*. Home is where I can belong and where I am accepted.

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<sup>20</sup> There is, perhaps, a suggestive theme of Jewish Christians accepting Gentile Christians; Luke addresses this issue in Acts.

<sup>21</sup> See Luke 15:7.

<sup>22</sup> The hated tax collectors were notorious for their cheating and implicit support for the governing Romans. Such "sinful" people were evidently thought to be *unworthy* of God's love and compassion; Jesus was their friend; Matt 11:16-19.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 15:1-2. Hospitality was a sign of (holy) fellowship and Jesus was not behaving the way a rabbi or prophet should act. The view of the religious leaders was that 'a person is known by the company he keeps.' They therefore wondered if it was credible that Jesus could really be a prophet – a genuine messenger from God? – given his preference for hanging out with so-called 'sinners.' Jesus responds with three surprising parables!

<sup>24</sup> Note the words of the last verse of the well-known song, "My Way" made famous by Frank Sinatra: "For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels and *not the words of one who kneels* The record shows *I took the blows* and did it my way!"

<sup>25</sup> In ministering to the "sinners" and the outcasts of society, Jesus was *not* minimising the seriousness of their sin, as his contemporaries and some modern critics have said. The language used is that of being "lost," even "dead." What the story illustrates is God's revolutionary remedy, which has two aspects. First, the young man comes to his senses and returns to his father seeking his mercy; this involves free will – clearly, he is not 'totally depraved' (Calvinistic language). Second, the father has been looking out for the son and runs to meet him and overwhelms him with generous love and undeserved forgiveness. This is how Jesus understood his ministry; God was opening his arms to welcome the lost home.

In contrast, the older son is basically the establishment figure in the story and his interaction with his father is, I think, the true climax of the parable. The older brother describes himself as steady, hard-working, and dependable.<sup>26</sup> He is the kind of person who goes to Church every week purely out of duty, not love, or joy. He has no close personal relationship with his father, even though he remains physically close on the estate. It's been said that "the older brother was not like the younger brother," but it is also true that "the older brother was not like his father." He doesn't have the father's heart and has no real sense of compassion. In effect, the proud older son is saying to the father, "Dad, I have worked *all* my life for you, so you *owe* me." He saw it as a contractual relationship, *not* one based on love or affection.

There is little doubt that the older brother represents the Pharisees and the teachers of Law. They would have been horrified by this parable, not just because of the way the father forgives the younger, "sinful" brother, but because of the story's critique of their own attitude toward God. They saw themselves as already right with God<sup>27</sup> and the "sinners" have simply received what they deserve as a consequence of their chosen lifestyle. This emphasises that those people who perceive themselves to be "good" are the hardest to enter God's kingdom, precisely *because* they think they're good enough already.<sup>28</sup> Consider this witty, self-righteous saying: "As I looked in the mirror and brushed my hair, I could see my halo shining there, and I thought how good the world would be if everyone was as nice as me. Yes, isn't it terribly sad that I'm so good and the world's so bad!" If our experience of God makes us feel *superior* to others, then we too are like the older brother. Rebellion is not just what we *do physically*, it is also an *attitude of mind*. Jesus is highlighting to his listeners that God wants a dynamic *relationship* with his children, not dutiful *religion* - a point the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law had failed to appreciate. They were so focused on the perceived wickedness of the tax collectors and "sinners" that they couldn't recognise the good news of God's love in front of their very eyes. Some of the crowd were people whose lives have been transformed physically, emotionally, morally, and spiritually by Jesus and all these grumblers could do was criticise. They refused to recognise that God was at work in Jesus Christ. Just as the father pleads with the older brother to join in with the celebration, we can also sense that Jesus is reaching out to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law saying, "Yes, I get it that through God's generosity he is reaching out to people you don't expect, but that doesn't mean there isn't room left over for you too! If you want to stay out of the party that's up to you, but don't think that God doesn't love you as well."<sup>29</sup> Grace lies the heart of this parable – scandalous grace that defies all rules and conventions. We can be both surprised and offended by God's amazing grace!

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<sup>26</sup> See Luke 15:29.

<sup>27</sup> See Phil 3:6.

<sup>28</sup> See Luke 18:9-14.

<sup>29</sup> We know from Acts that some pharisaical Jews do indeed join the party!

With which son do you tend to identify: the older son or the younger son? As a younger Christian I could identify more with the younger rebellious son, but as I get older, I think the subtle, perhaps unconscious trend is for my attitude to evolve into that of the older brother. It is only on reflection that I can perceive it - and I don't think I am alone! I believe this story is meant to challenge 'comfortable' and 'respectable' Christians, the modern equivalents of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. God welcomes *everyone* back with open arms, but some are too proud to kneel at the foot across.

In conclusion, we too can be lost like the two lost sons: either the younger son who was *foolish*, or the older son who was *self-righteous* - either way, lost in terms of a relationship with the father. What the story tells us - and what the two brothers had to discover for themselves - is that they are both *equally* welcomed and loved by the father. It wasn't a question of either/or but both/and. The story also tells us *not* to think of ourselves as so unworthy that we are unforgiveable, or as so righteous that we don't need forgiveness! Let us come to *our* senses and return to the waiting father in this season of Lent and join in the party. Let us pray.