

The Sons of the Father: The Younger Son

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Text: Luke 15:11–32

We have before us one of the most blessed parables a preacher could preach from. One that ought to touch the hardest of hearts. One where each person, whether having departed in sin or holed up in self-righteousness, finds his life laid out. One that ought to draw every heart to the Father who is set forth in this parable. As preachers, we sometimes wonder how it can be that after so many clear presentations of the gospel people still refuse to enter the Father's house. Was the gospel not set forth clearly, simply? Why are some of you still in your sin? Why do you talk of convictions, but never come to Christ? Why do you speak of what you know you must do and yet there is no doing it, no arising and coming to the Father? Is it that the Lord lied when He swore with Himself that whosoever cometh to Him He will in no wise cast out? Impossible! I suspect, rather, as we will discover in this parable, that the fault lies with us. When we lay our lives next to this parable and compare our lives to this son, spiritually, then we will not need to point out the sin of someone else in the congregation. Rather, we will see that we are all like this son who has gone astray. God's Word is true. All who come into this world are like sheep who have gone astray; we have

sought everyone our own way. Therefore, today, if you were asked to write on a piece of paper one of two things, either “saved by faith in the blood of Christ” or “condemned for calling God a liar,” which would it be? There is nothing in between.

Many times, when people try to explain the parables that Jesus sets forth, they read into them more than what Scripture says, or they add to the parables things which are not written. We must be careful that we do not draw out interpretations from the parables that would contradict what the rest of Scripture teaches. Therefore, anytime we consider a parable we must keep several things in mind. We must remember that just because something may be omitted from the parable, it doesn't mean that it is not true or that the Word of God does not explain it in another place. Take for example the father in this parable. We will see how the love of God the Father is pictured in a glorious way as pursuing after sinners. That does not take away from the reality that God is a holy, sovereign, and just God, and that nothing happens outside His will, even though these things do not come to the foreground in this parable. We do not read anything regarding the work of Christ as the Mediator in this particular parable, yet we will see the implications of His work clearly set forth. In light of this thought, simply consider the fatted calf, and the robe and ring that were put on the son. These all point to the work of Christ, yet the mediatorial work of Christ is not the point of this parable. We read nothing specific here about the work of the Holy Spirit, but without a doubt it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the younger son's heart that causes him to come to himself and return to the father. Again, that is not the main point of what Jesus is saying in this parable. We must first understand the main point Jesus is seeking to communicate, and that point, I believe,

is the pure love of the Father for His sons, plural, who have gone astray.

If you take a look at Luke 15, you will realize that Jesus told three parables that are connected. In the first parable we have a man, a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of these sheep had gone astray and he seeks to find that one and bring it back home. The second parable is of a woman who had ten pieces of silver and she loses one piece, lights a candle, and sweeps the house, searching diligently until she finds it. Then, there is the third parable, which we will consider here. As you look at these three parables, you can see them from the perspective of the Trinity. The first sets forth the work of Christ as the great Shepherd, the second sets forth the work of the Holy Spirit as the One who is seeking out lost and dead sinners, and the third shows us clearly the loving Father, the heart of God. All three of the parables end with this conclusion: when a sinner repents there is joy in the presence of the angels of God.

Notice as well, that this third parable is more explicit in detailing for us what takes place in the hearts of the characters. In the first parable we are not told how the lost sheep felt, what it was thinking or doing. In the second parable we read nothing about the coins, what they felt while lost. But here in this last parable, there is something that tugs at our hearts experientially. We read about a young man, and we will get to peek into what is going on in his heart and mind. The parable speaks about the sinner, his emotions and thoughts, and about his father, his emotions, actions, and thoughts. Eventually, we also will see the reaction of the elder brother.

So, with God's help, let's turn to this parable. Today, we are looking specifically at the younger son. At another time, we will consider the elder brother and the father. The theme over all three sermons will be *The Sons of*

the Father. In this first sermon we will consider only the younger son, based on verses 11–24. Let’s read again, starting at verse 18: “I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.”

For this sermon, we will consider the younger son: first, his rebellion; second, his repentance; and third, his reception.

The Younger Son’s Rebellion

This parable, along with the other two in this chapter, must be looked at in the context of verse 1. Jesus is speaking to the multitudes, and we read, “Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.” It seems there was something they heard in Jesus’s message that drew their hearts to Him. But we also read in verse 2, that “the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” It was to these two groups, the publicans and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes, that Jesus spoke these three parables. In this third parable Jesus speaks of a certain man who had two sons. We could say it more plainly this way: a certain man had two sons, a publican or a harlot as a younger son and a scribe or a Pharisee as an elder son. The father who is pictured must have been intended by Jesus to represent His Father in heaven.

We read of this young man in verse 12: “And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.” The younger son must have come to realize that he had a right to a part of the inheritance. He no doubt had heard of the pleasures that

could be found in the world and so he wanted his portion of the inheritance, that he might go out and enjoy these pleasures in his youth. This inheritance conceivably could have represented up to a third of his father's estate or livelihood. His elder brother would receive two thirds. And though he uses the word of affection—*father*—we don't find much hint of affection for his father at all. Notice how he immediately follows his request with a demand: "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." He does not ask his father, to see if his father thought he was able and capable at that time in his life to care for these goods; no, he just says, "Give me." He desires to indulge himself in sin and in the world. He doesn't simply ask for permission. He is demanding, "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me."

The son must have been wearied by his father's oversight of him. He must have thought it was bondage and slavery in his father's house. Why else would he make these demands? His father's eye was always over him. He felt that. He may have felt prohibited in his sin, and because of this he wanted to be out from under his father's authority. He wanted to go out by himself and live as he pleased. He wanted to be independent. He was ready to take on the world by himself. What do we read? The father divided unto his two sons his living. All he had, he gave to his sons.

Isn't this a picture of God and of mankind? A picture of each of us in particular? Our Creator God was the father of us all. The Jews understood this even more clearly when they said, "We have father Abraham as our father." In essence they were saying, "God is our Father because of our connection to Him through Abraham." And in a sense this is true. God is the father of creation, of all people. The Scriptures are clear that in our fall into sin through Adam, we have demanded that God give us

the portion of goods that falls to us. We did not want God to rule over us. We thought He was keeping something from us. We wanted to be independent. We wanted to be in control. We thought we knew better than He. We imagined it was only slavery and bondage to serve Him. The serpent said as much and we believed it. Why would God withhold from us this one tree when so many other trees were around to be eaten from? He must be hiding something from us. We wanted to be out of our Father's house and enjoy ourselves without His eye over us. We wanted to enjoy ourselves in the world.

As we read this parable, does it not remind us of people and situations in our lives where this is played out even today? Maybe you are one who sees himself or herself in this story. You, too, had been brought up in the church, by parents who sought to do you good, and yet you have gone out from your upbringing and from the convictions and truths which you know to be the Word of God. You have rebelled against God and against all that you know is true and right. This is the picture of us all. We have gone out from the presence of God to a far country, with no intention of returning. We take the blessings that come to us from the hand of God—our health, material possessions, and other gifts—and we use them to pursue our pleasures in this world. And though you thought to find pleasure, the Word of God says that if you yet remain in your sins, you are not truly happy. You are disappointed every day; you are miserable every day. You can seek to find pleasures in your sins, but they never deliver. They vanish in a moment and they are gone. They only end in bitter disappointment. We taste sin for a moment and Satan tells us it is so pleasing, but immediately it's gone, and we are left guilty. We're enslaved to it. Maybe we try to dig our way out a little bit; we try to work our way back to God. We reform our lives a little. We come to church again, and

we stop doing certain things we know are sinful and start doing things we imagine will please God. We imagine we are now on the mend. We make New Year's resolutions and promises, but we fall short time and again.

What happened to this young man? We read in verse 13, "And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living." You see what this young man did? He took everything, not only what his father gave, but everything he thought was his. He had no intentions of coming back to his father's house. And he went far away, not just down the street. He went to a far country and there he wasted his substance with riotous (or wasteful) living. Foolishly, he spent all that he had been given until he had nothing left to spend. It may be that his elder brother's accusations were true, that he spent his living with harlots. But even if they were exaggerations, we nevertheless read that he lived riotously. Whatever his sin was, we know it was a great sin. There was also the sin of leaving his father's house. He would have cast a stain upon his own name in leaving his father's house. The family would be expected to disown him. When others saw this boy walking, they would say, "There's that one who took all of his father's money and left his family and went on his way foolishly spending his inheritance. What a wicked son he is!"

But something happened. We read that when he had spent all (and here we see the hand of providence), "there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want" (v. 14). He began to be in great need. When he had all his money, he had enough to live on in the world, but now he had nothing left. And notice how gradual this was. He wasted his substance with riotous living, he spent it all, a famine arose, and *then* he came into want. Gradually, he fell deeper and further away from his father. And

that's also true spiritually; it begins many times with a *little* sin, as it were. It became so bad for this boy that he began to be in want and not even his former friends would help him. We read, "and no man gave unto him" (v. 16). All his so-called friends left him. It's likely that they were in need as well, due to the mighty famine in the land. Now he does what anyone would do when in need of something to eat. We read that he seeks out a job and he finds one. We are told that a citizen of that country provided him with a job. Here we see the irony of Jesus's words in the parable when He says, "and he sent him into his fields to feed swine" (v. 15).

In those days it was a common saying among the Jews that it was cursed for a man to raise swine. Pigs were unclean animals. We see to what depths this man has now come. Jesus could have said he fed cattle or some other animal, but Jesus's point is driven home with this word *swine*. He was showing to what depths this man had come. When the people heard this, they would have put this man in the category of the swine, the most unclean, dirty, and filthy animals. This man had come to a very low place. He even grovels in what the swine eat. We read, "He would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat" (v. 16). But even this was not given to him. Isn't this a real picture of sin? Satan promises us much. He tempts us with many things, but he never delivers. He never carries through. You see, to the citizen in this country, his pigs meant more than this man. Listen, you don't mean anything to Satan either. He would rather see your destruction. Satan is not seeking your pleasure. He is not seeking your true happiness. Young people, he is seeking your destruction, and he loves nothing more than to see you take this place by the swine and stay there until you die, or to urge you to despair by staying there. This is where this young man's rebellion led him. Far away from

God, without hope in this world; he was lost. And the worst of it is, up until this point we have read nothing that indicates he even realized it. There he was, working with the swine, wishing he had something to eat. We don't read anything else. He may not have even noticed the decline from his great riches to the place where he had now come. But then we read something marvelous in verse 17: "And when he came to himself." What a wonderful statement in this parable.

The Younger Son's Repentance

This brings us to our second thought. Up until this time, this younger son had been sinking away in sin and it had no effect upon him. He looked, as it were, in a mirror every day and may not have even noticed the changes. Yet the reality was that he was sinking deeper and deeper into sin, farther and farther away from God. And even if there was a momentary conviction that he was losing what he once had, it was brushed away quickly. He may have swept away such thoughts as too pessimistic to think about. Everything will turn out in the end, he told himself. Everything will eventually get better.

What do you do in the face of providential trials and afflictions? This famine was not an accident, but was directed by the hand of God, as are all the events in our lives. Has God used the trials you face to draw out your heart as he did here in this parable, or have you hardened yourself in these afflictions? For this boy, his first step back to the father was coming face to face with the reality of the situation he was in, and facing it honestly. He begins to see his own sin and guilt. The young man began to look at himself. As he did, he may have asked, "Are these pigs going to help me; will any man help me? No, this is all of my own doing and no one can help me. I remember my father's house. It's my own fault that I'm

here. I played the fool. I listened to my own evil heart. I have chosen this way. I have forsaken my father. Unclean pigs, unclean me.” My dear friend, have you ever come to yourself? Have you ever really faced yourself in the light of this Word of God? The Bible doesn’t say you’re getting lost; the Bible says you are lost. You are dead in trespasses and in sins. And what if right now, at this moment, all of your thoughts and all of your actions were written on a piece of paper and printed in a book? Would you like to have your name on it? Look at your hands. What have they done? Look at your eyes. What have you sought after? Look at your mouth. What have you spoken? Think of your thoughts. What have you thought? What has been the constant stream day after day? Don’t shrink back, friend. Face the reality. What are you living on? Are you living on the swine husks of this world and are you satisfied with those? Have you deliberately gone on against your conscience? Do you acknowledge that where you are today is no one else’s doing, that you can only blame yourself? Do you acknowledge that all your decisions and choices have brought you to this place distant from God?

This man had tried to turn to others, but no man gave to him. Perhaps you, too, have turned to others and sought help. You explained what was going on in your life, but they could not help. No man gave you real help. You changed your habits. You started reading your Bible. You started coming more faithfully to church. You spoke to others about your soul’s concerns and your needs. Yet no man gave to you. You can’t help yourself out of the pit you’ve dug. Oh, what a blessed beginning are those words, “And when he was come to himself!” Yet, this was not a place to rest. There are many sinners who have stopped right there. They have come to themselves and have never actually gotten up and returned to the Father’s house. Some of you may be like this young man; you imagine

yourself to be like this son. You know you are a sinner and you need to go back to the Father, but all you do is think about it. You imagine what it would be like. You are like the son here who begins to imagine what he is going to say to his Father when he goes home. Some of you have certain expectations about what coming to Christ looks and feels like, and when it does not go quite the way you imagine, you give up coming. However, I need to tell you that so often, when we do come to ourselves, it goes so entirely differently than what we had expected and what we thought. Many have an idea how they will pray and how they will feel. And so, too, did this young man. He thought he was going to pray in such and such a way, but we will see he didn't even get half of his prayer from his mouth before he arrived home. We must come to the point where we cannot stay in the swine fields but must arise and come to the father. And then it goes in such a different way than what we expected. So it happened with this young man.

He began to consider his father, and how many hired servants his father had. "How many of my father's servants have bread enough, and to spare?" He thinks of all the servants his father has; he is so good to them. They have it so good and look at me, perishing with hunger. This man thinks of his father's heart. It is the father's heart that draws him back home. Let these two thoughts captivate your minds for a moment. Bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger. Those are two thoughts that ought to grip your heart. There is in the Father's house bread enough and to spare for the greatest of sinners, and do you still perish from hunger? There is mercy with God and there is hope beyond your expectation. We begin to see that God has been saving sinners from the beginning of time and is doing so to this very day. He is not hindered in saving whoever comes to Him. If He can

save the murderer of the whole human race, Adam; if He can save David, who in the face of such received love murdered and committed adultery; then He can certainly save me. A hope is stirred in the heart that there is mercy for me in the Father's house, even if I can but be a servant in His house.

This son began to see that being a servant in the father's house was better than dwelling in the tents of wickedness. He began to understand just how wicked leaving his father had been. He had a position of a son and he wasted it away, and now he was worse off than even the servants of his father's house. What does this son do? He thinks to himself, I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, "Father (notice how differently he uses this term now than when he left home), I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Father, make me as one of thy hired servants." Not, "Father, give me," but, "Father, make me. Father, make me, draw me, receive me." He shows his great dependence on his father. He acknowledges his sins. "I have sinned against heaven and before thee." He comes to himself. That's repentance.

Have you come to the place where you confess that you are worthy of God's just displeasure? That you are no more worthy to be called His son and thus say, "Could I be as one of Thy hired servants?" And perhaps, there is someone here who is under conviction and says to himself, "I must go home, and I must bend my knees and I must pray." Sinner, don't be so foolish. This prodigal son didn't say, "Tomorrow may be a better day." Perhaps it was raining, and he would console himself that he would do this tomorrow. No, no, no. What do we read? As soon as he had said this, "he arose, and came to his father" (v. 20). Dear friend, have you not considered that your conviction may fade away and you will remain at the swine's trough in a

worse condition than before? God has sent His message to you time and time again, but will you stay where you are and perish in your sins? Don't you realize there is but one heartbeat between you and death? Flee from the wrath to come. You are living on swine husks while the table of plenty is set before you.

But maybe you say, "I have no right to come to Jesus." Isn't this the very argument the young man uses? "I'm not worthy to be called thy son but make me as one of thy hired servants." And furthermore, have you ever sought to come and He has turned you away? Have you ever tried to come, and He said "No" to you? Maybe you say, "But I am not one of those for whom there is mercy to be given." Then I ask you, who has told you so? It is none other but your own wicked heart and the devil himself who would tell you this. Have you heard the Lord say to you, "You are such a wicked son"? Even if such a thought entered the mind of this son, he would not listen. Rather, we read, he arose and came to his father.

Perhaps you say, I need the work of the Holy Spirit. That is truer than even you know. Who is it that gives him the desire to arise and come to his father? It is the Holy Spirit. Who is it that causes him to come to himself? It is the Holy Spirit. But do you think this young man was able to put his finger on it and say, "Now I know this is the work of the Holy Spirit"? No. But having come to himself, having seen his sin that he had sinned against heaven and his father, and that he was no more worthy to be called his son, without another word he arose and came to his father. The prodigal did not linger any longer by sitting on the ground with the swine thinking about it, praying about it. When death was all around him, he came to the only possibility of hope and life his father's house. And he must do so now. He said to himself, "I will arise and go." And he arose and came. He comes to himself in brokenness, and

in a deep sense of his humility, he casts himself on the free grace and mercy of God. I encourage you to be like this son, to turn away from your sins and come to Christ. It is a blessing to hear someone say, “I will arise and go to my father.” But what a greater blessing it is when you actually arise and come. There are many with good intentions, but they never come to Christ. Many have had convictions of the conscience, have remembered an earnest sermon, or have thought of the death of a loved one, but they never come to Jesus. And what happened when he came? We read, “But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him” (v. 20). There’s the answer. That’s the beginning, really, as we will see in our third thought.

The Younger Son’s Reception

We know that the son was in a country at a great distance from home, but it’s amazing what we read in verse 20. Our thoughts have been focused on what was happening with the man in the far-off country, but what was going on at his previous home? We read that when he was yet a great way off—the passage is almost implying that the son had hardly come to himself and got on his feet to come home—the father was leaving to meet him. From a great way off, he sees his son. Isn’t that the drawing love of the Father, already at work, drawing this son home? You see, it’s not the son’s petition that is to have effect with the father. No, the father was already on the lookout for his son. His father saw him, rags and all. He smelled him, pigs and all. What does his father do? He comes running. In those days, for a middle-aged or elderly man to run in public was seen as a disgrace and was frowned upon. But not for this father; his son was coming home. His father saw him, had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, kissing him. It was not gradually that he would allow his boy to come into the house, after he was all cleaned up and clothed

that he would give him a peck on the cheek. No, no, no. There was immediate reception. There was full forgiveness. There was immediate pardon. That's the wonder of free and sovereign grace. And what happens even before this son has a chance to speak the words he had been contemplating to say? It is his father who sees him, has compassion on him, runs to him, falls on his neck, and kisses him. The word used here implies that he kisses and kisses and kisses him. And that's a picture of our God as He sees returning sinners.

Is this your view of God? If not, you may need to ask yourself if your view of God conforms with the Word or with your own perceptions. We can justify in our minds our view of God, but we cannot avoid this parable and its truth. Sinner, why then are you lingering? Yes, you are lost in yourself, and have so much that testifies against you. But doesn't this young man, also? Doesn't this parable demonstrate to you that God receives sinners, whoever they may be? That He does so, not because of who they are, because of their prayers, or because of anything in them, but because He loves them? Because He sees them, even from all eternity. He has given His Son for them.

Don't be like the Pharisees who thought they had to do something to gain God's favor. They imagined they were good people. They thought if God was going to save anyone, it would be them. And now Jesus speaks about the Father in such a way that they can't even begin to understand and comprehend. You see, when they saw the prodigals, publicans, sinners, and harlots coming to the Father and being received of Him, they were asking, "How can this be? Jesus is wrong. He's a blasphemer." Are these your thoughts of Jesus today?

Not only does the father have compassion on the son, falling on his neck and kissing him, but he does a number of other things as well. He shows this son his love. We

need to be familiar with the culture of that day to understand what the father's actions mean. He dressed his son in the best robe, which was a symbol of status. In the eyes of his father, he was to be arrayed in the most beautiful apparel, in the best robe. "Don't speak to me about being a servant; you are my son." The only words the son was able to say was that he had sinned against heaven and in his sight, and was no more worthy to be called his son. But then the father interrupts him, as it were, and says, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him." Isn't this signifying the robe of righteousness the believer receives in coming to Jesus so that he can now stand in the presence of the Father? When they placed a ring on the son's hand, it was likely a signet ring by which the father said, "You are my son. I give you authority in my house." A ring on his hand would show unmistakably that this indeed was his son. And the son could look at that ring any day and say, "I have been received back by my father. It is his word of oath and promise to me." And then the father places shoes upon his son's feet. Slaves did not wear shoes or sandals. This was another indication that the son was to be treated as a child of the father, not as a slave.

Finally, the father killed the fatted calf, which was reserved for special guests. The father is saying, "There is no one more important, my son, than you. You have come to yourself, and have come back to me." Do you realize that this is the message of the gospel as well? Who can deliver us from our past? Who can forgive and cleanse our lives of all our rebellion and sin? There is but one. That is the person of Jesus Christ, who has come to this earth and taken upon Himself, as it were, the rags and the odor, and has become cursed of God for the sake of sinners. He clothed Himself, as it were, in sin. He was unjustly condemned and He went the way of the cross to merit eternal life for us. It is as if the Father Himself turned

away from His only beloved Son so that He might run to meet returning sinners. What does this parable say to you today? There is but one way of return to God. The Father looks and He sees returning sinners and runs to meet them even today. He speaks to them His compassionate words of forgiveness. "There is forgiveness with Me," He says, "that I may be feared." The father met this boy and kissed him. What He sets forth in this parable with the younger son is His love, His super-abounding love, from all eternity. Love for a people who have ruined themselves in sin. And yet, He comes and restores them back as sons and as daughters into His presence. Do you know this life of the younger son and have you returned to the Father's house? Amen.