

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons, Part One

Luke 15:1-2, 11-24

Key Theme: Adoption

[Core Gospel Concepts: Identity in Christ, Sin, Repentance, Intimacy with the Father]

THE STORY:

One day, 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.” So Jesus told them several parables like this one:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between his two sons. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and set off for a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth in wild living.

“After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death? I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”’

“So he got up and went to his father. 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. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Optional Memory Verse: Galatians 4:4-5: “When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law so that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

- **What is life like for abandoned orphans? Why is it so difficult not to have a father?**
 - Possible responses: *Lonely; no help; no one to depend on; no one who cares; no sense of belonging; no provision; deep sense of abandonment; uncertain future; need to provide for oneself; tendency to beg, borrow, steal instead of trusting in a father to provide; no place to call home; no shelter; no protection; easily gets into trouble; independent; does not need to listen to authority; has no parent or authority to tell him or her what to do or how to live; no good clothes; looked down on; people don't want to touch or associate.*

Teacher's Transition Statement

This story has two parts, and deals with two sons who each act like orphans, but in very different ways. Today, we will look at the first son, and think in turn about how we live like orphans sometimes, even as Christians.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory:
 - Note all the words and actions of the younger son.
 - Note all the words and actions of the father.

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Audience:** Who was Jesus telling the parable to? Why?
- **The Younger Son:** What was he like? How was he living like an orphan? What do we learn about ourselves from the younger son?
- **The Father:** What was he like? What do we learn about God from the father?
- **Repentance:** What does this story teach us about repenting from orphan living?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **Why was Jesus telling these parables? Who was with Jesus while he was teaching? What did he observe about these people?**
 - *Tax collectors and sinners had drawn near to Jesus, and he ate with them.*
 - *This upset the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were judging Jesus for mixing with sinners. Jesus was challenging their way of thinking.*
- **Who were the main characters in the parable?**

The Younger Son

- **What was the younger son like at different points in the story? What did he do or say that makes you say that? How did the younger son relate to his father? What was his attitude toward his father?**
 - **What was he like at the beginning of the story?**

- *Proud, demanding, disrespectful, unthankful, self-centered, rule-breaking, foolish.*
 - *Did not have or want a real relationship with his father; he only wanted his father's things, wished him "dead" in his life, and wanted complete independence.*
 - *I.e. he wanted his father's things, not his father himself.*
- **What was he like in the middle of the story, immediately after all his money was gone? What was the result of his rebellion against his father?**
 - *Was left starving, desperate, friendless, hopeless.*
- **What was he like later when he "came to his senses"? What does it mean that "he came to his senses"?**
 - *Saw his desperate situation, realized it was all his fault, and saw that he could not help himself. His only hope was his father.*
- **How are people today like the younger son – especially in the time before he came to his senses? How are even Christians like him sometimes?**
 - *Various examples today of rebellion against God and "wild living," especially as our lives parallel the son's attitude toward himself, his father, and his life.*
 - *Sometimes Christians forget God and are interested in themselves more than God and others. Religion becomes more about us than about God. We desire to be important, to have a good reputation, to be educated or wealthy, to depend on ourselves, not God.*
 - *Therefore we worry, and turn to dishonesty, false gods, quick fixes, pain relief, divorce, etc. We run from our problems instead of running to Jesus.*
- **What did the younger son finally do right?**
 - *"Came to his senses."*
 - *Saw where his sins had led him, what the results of his choice were.*
 - *Saw that he deserved no help from his father or anyone else.*
 - *Agreed and confessed that it was all his own fault.*
 - *Returned to the father, knowing he was the only one able to help him.*
 - *Asked for mercy. Understood that his father was a merciful man.*
- **The son did repent, but how was his repentance incomplete?**
 - *Imagined that he could only come back as hired help. He never imagined coming back as a son. He did not dare ask for full restoration.*
 - *Still did not really understand his father or the fullness of his father's love and mercy.*
- **Think back to our introduction question about abandoned orphans. How was the younger son living and acting like an orphan at various points in the story? (Note: You may choose to have your students first discuss in pairs before listening to their answers in the full group.)**
 - *At first:*
 - *Acted as if his father did not care about him. Demanded his "rights."*
 - *Wanted to depend on himself alone, to run his own life.*
 - *Concerned only about himself.*
 - *Easily got into trouble.*
 - *When destitute:*
 - *No one would care for or help him, had no one to depend on, sent out to the pigs, away from people, abandoned, uncertain of the future, fending for himself, begging.*
 - *No place to call home, no shelter, no protection.*
 - *Was looked down on. People didn't want to touch or associate with him.*

- **How do fathers in your society act when their sons rebel against them? Can you think of any examples?** (Have the students discuss in small groups, then in the larger group.)
- **Tell us all the actions and words of the father in this story as they relate to the younger son.**
(Review details of the story)
 - o *Did not force his son to stay with him. Gave him his share of the inheritance.*
 - o *Watched and waited for his son, ran to him, hugged, kissed, put on the best robe, gave him a ring, sandals, slaughtered the fattened calf for them to celebrate.*
 - o *Called for a party without demanding explanation or restitution.*
 - o *Rejoiced because his son was dead, now alive, was lost, but now found.*
- **What do you think the robe, ring, and sandals stand for?**
 - o *Robe: the “best” robe – distinct, special, likely belonging to the father himself. Also covers his son’s uncleanness: a picture of Jesus’ blood and righteousness covering our sin!*
 - o *Ring: showed he possessed the father’s authority, similar to having the family credit card, showing he was a son, not a servant.*
 - o *Sandals: the son is a free man, not a slave. Only slaves went barefoot in this culture.*
- **So what do we learn about the father from all this?**
 - o *Merciful, loving, not worried about his reputation in the community, willing to forgive wrongs and losses. Wanted relationship with his son.*
 - o *Thrilled for his son to return.*
- **What was the father willing to give up for his son?**
 - o *His dignity, reputation, and pride.*
 - o *His property, because he cared more about his son than his possessions.*
- **What did the father most want from his son?**
 - o *Intimacy, close fellowship.*
 - o *To know him, to be known by him.*
- **Who do you think the father represents?**
 - o *God, our Father.*
- **So what does this part of the story teach us about God?**
 - o *He is forgiving; he has mercy for those who turn back to him, not anger.*
 - o *He longs for intimacy with us, to know us and be known by us.*
 - o *He is loving. He wants us to be sons and daughters, not slaves!*
- **How do we as believers often view God, especially when we sin?**
 - o *As angry, ready to punish us harshly; as distant, offended, not wanting our fellowship. Sometimes we even view him as vindictive, prepared to get revenge against us because of our sin against him.*
 - o *As one who requires us to earn our way back to him.*
- **How does God actually want us to view him?**
 - o *As our loving father.*
 - o *Ready to forgive when we repent and turn back to him.*
 - o *Willing to sacrifice himself and his dignity to gain us back.*

- o *Longing to be restored to and in fellowship with us, his children.*
- o *Wanting us to know him.*
- **When the father refuses to listen to all of his son's explanation and apology, what is he communicating?**
 - o *He is saying, "I will not allow you to be a servant, to earn your way back home. I am making you my son – completely by grace. I want a son, not a slave."*
 - o *"I want to be close to you, to be intimate."*
 - o *He wants us at the feast! Wants to cover us with the robe of Christ's perfect righteousness.*
- **What do we learn about repentance from this story?**
 - o *We need to "come to our senses!"*
 - *See our sin, confess that it is ours and not anyone else's.*
 - *Realize that we deserve punishment.*
 - o *Believe in the mercy of God in Christ.*
 - o *Turn back to him, believing in the Savior who died for us. Trust him to forgive and cleanse us from our sin and give us his righteousness.*
 - o *Ask him to help us to change our words, thoughts, attitudes, affections, and behavior.*

General Application Questions:

- **What are some ways we may act like the lost younger son (i.e. like a spiritual orphan)?**
 - o *Feel that God is withholding something good so we need to steal it for ourselves.*
 - o *Rejecting God's rule over our lives. Ignoring his law because we don't trust that He is leading us well.*
 - o *Giving in to lust. Being jealous of someone else. Complaining about our lives.*
- **Read Galatians 4:4-7 - "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir."**
 - o **When we trust in Jesus, we are no longer slaves or orphans but sons and daughters of God, a kind and loving father. How should this truth affect our daily lives?**
 - **How should believing this truth help you to repent of your sin and follow Him?**
 - **How should the love of the Father affect the way you look at other people? How would this help you not to judge people harshly?**
- **Read John 14:18 - "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you."**
 - o **Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to every believer. How does this promise encourage you? How does it help you live as a Christian today?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **What recent actions or thoughts of yours lately have been like the lost younger son or a spiritual orphan?**
 - o **How have you despised or rejected your Father at times?**
 - o **How have you run too much after the things of the world even in some small way?**
 - o **What do you need to repent of today?**