

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons, Part Two

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Key Themes: Self-Righteousness & Orphan Living

[Core Gospel Concepts: Identity in Christ, Intimacy with the Father, Repentance, Justification, Use of the Law]

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. 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. 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.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"But the older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.'"

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)

- **Can you think of a time in your life when you have been good and faithful, while you saw someone else who has been unfaithful treated better than you? How did that make you feel? Why did you feel this way?**

Teacher's Transition Statement

Usually when you hear this story, the focus is on the younger brother and his need to repent, and possibly about the great love of the father when he does. But we don't think much about the "good guy," the elder brother.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory:
 - Note all the words and actions of the elder 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 Older Son:** What was he like? What was good about him? What was not good? How was he living like an orphan? What do we learn about ourselves from the older son?
- **The Father:** What was he like? What do we learn about God from the father? What does he want from us?
- **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):

- **Who was Jesus' main audience when telling this story?**
 - *The Pharisees and the teachers of the law.*
- **Who would those people be in today's world?**
 - *Those who look down on others, perhaps church people, people approved by society or religion, people of dominant races or classes.*
- **What seems good about the elder brother?**
 - *He is obedient, good, never refused to obey his father, stayed at home, faithful, did not waste inheritance, disciplined, did not meet prostitutes, did not get drunk, and caused no problems.*
- **What was not good about him?**

- o *He was self righteous, judgmental, hated his younger brother, jealous, angry because of the mercy shown to his brother, offended, and had no love for brother or father.*
- o *His service was like a slave or servant rather than the joyful service of a son, and wanted an exclusive party with his friends.*
- o *Described his brother to his father as “this son of yours” instead of “my brother.”*
- **Describe his relationship with his father.**
 - o *Obedient on the outside, but was depending on his work or good behavior in order to earn from his father respect, position, and possessions rather than rejoicing in simply being his son and enjoying all the fruits of that relationship.*
 - o *Did not share his father’s heart of love for the younger son; in fact he did not understand his father at all.*
 - o *Still wanted to control his own life, but instead of doing this by running away, he chose to stay at home and obey (i.e. tried to control his life or “get life” by staying and obeying).*
 - o *Was inside the house, but wandering far from home in his heart. Was lost inside the house.*
 - o *Did not claim a relationship with his brother or father: “This son of yours!”*
- **How did he use his obedience? Was it joyful service out of love for his father?**
 - o *No, not joyful service but he used obedience as a tool to make himself feel worthy or righteous, to “deserve” his father’s favor*
 - o *used obedience as a tool to defend himself, judge others, attack his brother, disrespect his father, argue, shame his father, and to stay outside.*
 - o *Ultimately he used it as a weapon to get what he thought he deserved.*
- **Who did the elder son represent?**
 - o *Religious people: the Pharisees and teachers of the law.*
 - o *Those who were “inside the house, but wandering far from home.”*
 - o *Those who are very busy for God, obeying his commands at least superficially, but not knowing and loving him.*
 - o *Those who condemned Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them.*
- **So who is more lost, the younger son or the elder?**
 - o *The elder son is more lost because of his “goodness” blinds him to his lostness, to his need for his father’s love. He does not “come to his senses” the way the younger son does.*
 - *He is not starving like the younger son, but is full and satisfied - satisfied with himself. So the younger son, though just as far from the father, is more likely to come to the end of himself and see his desperate need.*
- **The younger son goes inside to the party, but the older son does not! What does this mean?**
 - o *The elder brother is lost, not despite his goodness, but because of his goodness.*
 - o *Because he “obeyed” (i.e. obeyed in order to get control, to merit life), he can’t really understand his father’s love, therefore he won’t come in.*
 - o *Our “goodness” can separate us from God worse than our “badness” IF it hides our sin, or hides how we try to save and rule ourselves, if it makes us think, “I deserve this.”*
- **So is it wrong to try to be good?**
 - *No! We are not saying it is wrong to be good, to do good, or to obey God. Of course not! But we should not only be good for the wrong reasons.*
- o **What is the proper reason for true obedience?**

- *The foundation for our obedience should be love and gratitude for God's mercy to us. Obedience should not be just an attempt to earn God's or other people's favor.*
 - *The motivation and power to obey can only come from the Good News of what Christ has done for us - living sinlessly, dying for us, and rising again to victory.*
 - *We strive to obey God and live a life worthy of the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit because of what Christ has already done for us.*
- **What is the proper goal or motivation for true obedience?**
 - *Ask yourself: what do you really want?*
 - *Do you mostly want God's things? – wealth, respect, reputation, position, success, authority, comfort, security, pleasures. Or...*
 - *Do you mostly want God himself? God the Father – to know and be known, to have a relationship with the one true God.*
- **Who should have gone looking for the younger brother?**
 - *The elder brother!*
 - **Who is our true elder brother, the one who comes looking for us in order to bring us home to the Father?**
 - *Jesus! The true elder brother who brings us back even though it cost him his life. He went to the cross to bring us to the Father's feast!*
 - **Why does the story end unfinished? Why is the elder brother still outside, and we're left wondering whether he came in or not?**
 - *Jesus wants us to listen to him, whether we are elder or younger brother types. He is calling to us, "Come home!" Whether you have run away from home, trying to discover yourself, or have hidden inside the house behind your own obedience, you have been away from home.*
 - *Home is the place you were created for, the person you were created to be. There is a true elder brother. He is inviting you to come home.*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **What are some wrong motivations we believers sometimes have for trying to obey God?**
 - *to look good in front of others, to improve or maintain our reputations*
 - *to feel proud, confident, and righteous before God*
 - *to obtain higher positions, opportunities, power, or wealth*
- **What good things do we sometimes need to repent of? In other words, what are some of the good things we do that we sometimes do for sinful reasons?**
 - *attendance at church, prayer meetings - or tithing - or serving in the church (but looking down on others who do less); being kind to others (but expecting recognition or appreciation), sexual purity (but looking down on those who have failed), sacrificing self for God's work (and feeling proud)*
- **What are some signs that may reveal that we are living as elder brothers?**
 - *Anger - at God, at self, at others.*
 - *Jealous – "I deserve, they don't." For example: "I have prayed so much for _____ and those people get what I want even though they are not as faithful as me!"*
 - *Judgmental of others.*

- o *Hates the law, but claims to love it. In other words, he obeys the law, but hates it when it doesn't serve him well.*
 - *Says, "I have slaved," To him, rules feel like "orders" rather than God's loving guidance. Obedience feels like "slavery" instead of grateful service.*
- o *Exclusive, shows favoritism*
 - *The elder brother wants to meet with his small group of friends. The father ~~slaughters the fattened calf to~~ welcome the whole community to celebrate together.*
 - *The elder brother doesn't want to "eat with sinners."*
- o *Unforgiving.*
- o *Not interested in sharing the Good News! (except as another form of merit).*

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

- **What "goodness" do you need to repent of?**
 - o **In other words, what good things do you do? Why do you do them? How are these things at least sometimes done *for you* instead out of love for your Father?**
- **Remembering the elder brother (the Pharisees) and his attributes, how have you acted like the older brother? Are you jealous? In what ways do you tend to think you deserve to be treated better by God or others? How is your thinking wrong?**