

Luke 15:11-32 - The parable of the two lost sons

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Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0:00] Good morning everyone. Good morning. Our reading today is being taken from Luke 15 verses 11 to 32.

! Jesus continued, 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 them. 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.

After he'd spent everything, there was a severe famine in the 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.

[1:09] Then 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.

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 servants. 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 round 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 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.

[2:21] For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard the 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. The elder 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 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 have to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

[3:47] He was lost and is found. Amen. That's great. Thank you, Sharon, for reading for us. Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we come and we want to humble ourselves before you and acknowledge our need of you. As we've been thinking with the children, we don't want to hold on to our sins so that we might not take hold of Christ.

And so this morning we say that we're sorry and we long for more of Jesus. So we pray that you might open our eyes and our hearts this morning, that you might do your work in our hearts for your glory and for our good.

Through your word, by your spirit, in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. There's a big clue in the very beginning of the reading that has just been read for us that this parable of Jesus is not about one lost son.

Look at verse 11. There was a man who had two sons, two sons, which means really that this parable is not about one lost son as the paragraph heading has it in your NIV, but rather two, two. [5:09] Not just one way to be lost and hopeless, but two ways to be lost and hopeless. And I want you to see that with me together this morning as we look at both the younger brother and the older brother and then the father.

So let's think through the characters in the story. And we're going to start with the younger brother. Now, starting with the younger brother, his lostness, I think, is supposed to be obvious to us. In verse 12, if you look down at it, he asks his father to give him his share of the estate, which, if you think about it, is a very rude thing to ask your father for.

What is he saying? If you say to your father, who is still alive, Dad, what I really want is what's coming to me when you die.

What you are saying to your dad is you would be better for me if you were dead. I would prefer it if you were dead, because then I'd get my inheritance and I'd be rich.

And despite the rudeness of it at the end of verse 12, the father graciously divides the property between the two sons and the younger brother takes his share and leaves. Now, we're not given much detail about what the younger brother does with his newfound wealth.

[6:23] We're given it one ominous line which says that he squandered it on wild living. What's involved in that is left mostly, I think, to our imaginations because the point is in verse 14 that the money is run out very quickly.

It's all gone. And the same time, a famine hits the land, so there's no food and no money. And the younger brother has no friends and he ends up hiring himself out to feed pigs.

And the situation is so desperate that in verse 16, if you look down at that, he's longing to eat the pig food himself because no one gave him anything. He had nothing.

I think what you're supposed to see if you're reading the story, you're supposed to see this is rock bottom for a young Jewish boy. It doesn't get any worse than this for a young Jewish boy.

Pigs are unclean animals to Jews and the Old Testament law forbade them from eating them and keeping them thereby. And, you know, even if you are allowed to eat pork, right, still eating pig food is not something that any of us would want to do in any culture.

[7:30] And yet here he is. This is where wishing his father dead has got him. It's got him to the pigsty. He's hungry. He's desperate. He's miserable.

He's lost. And he's all alone. Now, you and I, we read that story. You know, don't you, that lostness can still look like that, can't it? You know, the kid who cuts loose, who lives recklessly and ends up in a mess.

We know that story all too well. They might not end up in a pigsty, but they might end up with a prison sentence or in a rehab clinic or in a homeless shelter. But there's supposed to be more to this story, I think, than just foolish living.

Because as Jesus tells the story, we're supposed to notice that the father in the story is a representative of God. And the lostness of the younger brother is ours spiritually, even while it might not be ours physically.

So sinful rebellion, in effect, is saying to God with the younger brother, as he says to his father, he's saying to God, you know what, God? You would be better for me if you were dead.

[8:35] God, I would like the blessings that you offer, the riches that you offer, but I don't really want you. Can you remove yourself and still give me those blessings, please?

Give me the good of your creation, but leave me alone to enjoy it in self-indulgence. God, I don't want to hear about your rules. I don't want to hear about your expectations. I don't want to hear about the debt I owe.

I just want to take your stuff and I want to run. Now, perhaps if you're honest this morning, you can see that in your own heart. If you're like me and you are actually a younger sibling, then typically this is what we are like, right?

You know, our older siblings, they choose the safe option, the quiet life, the respectable career. We choose excitement and rebellion, the big city and the bright lights. Rules are there to be broken.

On my first day at secondary school, as I was sat outside the headteacher's office, my older sister walked past me and said, typical. And this is where our hearts are drawn, isn't it?

[9:41] To rebellion against authority and against God here. And Jesus warns us that it leads to a pigsty, physically and spiritually. And maybe you know that only too well this morning.

Perhaps that's where you are in a mess of your own making, estranged from God and lost. Perhaps this morning you too are rock bottom. Nowhere to go.

But what about the other son? What about the older brother? Think about the older brother. This is where I think we need to look in and think about his lostness, because I don't think it's quite as obvious. For the younger brother, his lostness is written all over the walls of the pigsty.

But for the older brother, his lostness is just as real. It's just more difficult to see. So notice in verse 12, he also receives his share of the estate from his father.

He too got the money. He got the share. But he didn't leave and squander it on wild living and prostitutes. He accuses that he accuses his brother of doing. Instead, he stays close to his father and works hard.

[10 : 42] That seems like a good thing to do, doesn't it? But we're meant to notice that amidst his hard work, there is something deeply wrong with this older brother. Because despite his close proximity to the father, what becomes clear is that he has no greater affection for his father than his younger brother does.

Notice how he speaks. Look down at verse 29. Notice that he says that he has been slaving for his father. All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

And then he accuses his father of being stingy with him. So he's, I'm a hired hand to you. I'm a slave. And you never gave me even a young goat to celebrate with.

Now, regardless of whether that's true or not, and I suspect it's not, what really makes this older brother angry is not just his stinginess towards him, but it is his generosity towards the younger brother.

That makes the older brother furious. So angry that he refuses to go into the party. Now, at this point in the story, you might have some sympathy for the older brother.

[11 : 45] Now, why shouldn't he be mad? You know, he's worked all those years for his father. The younger brother has just gone off, squandered all the money, lived a wild life, and has now come back and there's a party for him.

And I've been working really hard, and I've never had a party. That doesn't seem fair. But actually, the assumption that the older brother is making is that he doesn't ever need his father's grace and kindness.

You know, he thinks, doesn't he, that actually people should get what they earn. You know, if you work hard, then you get to live well. If you run away, then you get judgment. And he assumes that he doesn't need his father's grace and kindness.

He assumes that everything he needs from his father, he is capable of earning it from his father, and his father should give it to him. Pastor Tim Keller, who wrote a book on this parable, points out that the older brother's refusal to join the party was no small matter.

It was a significant slight on his father's character. From the way the story is written, we are meant to see that the party for the found younger brother is really a very large celebration.

[12 : 55] The best robe is brought out, the family jewelry is used, the fattened calf is killed. This is likely the largest celebration that the father has ever conducted. And the whole community would have been included.

And so it was obvious to everybody that the older brother was not there and not involved in the party. It's obvious that he disapproved of his father's kindness. So while his brother has stayed and worked, he is not found in the pigsty but in the field.

Still he has no respect for his father. And he too slights the father's character. You know, his brother wished his father dead so he could get his money. The older brother wished his father gave him more money on the grounds of what he did.

See, listen, both brothers, didn't they, they wanted a life free from the father's restraints. One of them thought the best way was to run away and the other thought the best way was to buy it. It's interesting, isn't it, that this idea becomes even clearer when you see the context of the parable. So if you look down at chapter 15, verse 1, you'll notice in chapter 15, verse 1, that Luke tells you Jesus is telling this parable to tax collectors and Pharisees. The Pharisees are listening to Jesus and watching him hang out with tax collectors, as Ray pointed out to us earlier.

[14 : 15] And in the story, the tax collectors are clearly the younger brothers, aren't they? They're the ones who have just run away from God. They've abandoned God and they're collecting money for the Roman rulers. And the older brothers, well, they're the Pharisees, aren't they?

The tax collectors might be in the pigsty of their own greed, but the Pharisees are lost in their religious obedience. They assume that God owes them because they've been good. And Jesus' point to these Pharisees is, no, you're just as lost as a tax collector.

Lost not in immorality, but lost in religion. Offended by the mercy of God, even though that's what you need. Let's just try and slow down a minute and think about these two kinds of lostness.

The lostness of the younger brother is obvious, isn't it? Wicked, wild, out for himself. And like I've said, perhaps that's you this morning. Perhaps it's a surprise to you that you're in church this morning. It's quite out of character.

Well, you're very welcome here. It's good that you're with us. But perhaps you're not like that this morning. And perhaps it bugs you the idea that God does forgive undeserving people. Perhaps you're lost in an older brother way.

[15 : 23] Perhaps you're lost in religion. Perhaps you assume this morning that your own moral effort, your own goodness, your own desire to come to church, to read a Bible, to know a few church songs, to believe in God, means that you're not as bad as those younger brothers out there.

So you don't need God's mercy. You need God to give you what you earn. And so you look down at others. And you're angry that God might forgive the undeserving.

Now, of course, this morning, it's a great question to ask. This is a great place to ask this question. It's a great place to ask the question, am I an older brother? You know this is the right place to ask it, don't you? Because churches, mosques and temples are places where older brothers come to hang out.

This is their idea of a good time. People who are confident in their own religious abilities, that they don't see a problem that they can't fix. There's not a moral problem that they can't undo by their own obedience.

That they can say a few more prayers than the next person. They can go on a few more pilgrimages. They can be a bit more serious than the average. And God, the universe, Allah or Lord Vishnu or whatever will owe them good health, happy marriage, a nice house, long life, a peaceful death surrounded by people who love them with hymns playing in the background.

[16 : 37] There is, I think, a secular version to that religion as well. You know, perhaps this morning you don't believe in God. You're maybe agnostic. But you still think, don't you, that life is mostly about your own efforts.

You know, your moral efforts to be a good person, to work harder than the rest, to put in the study, the overtime, the networking, to make life work. If you do those things, life will go well for you.

But the story calls that view of life, whether you're religious or irreligious, it calls it lostness. Why? Well, because with the older brother it makes this fatal assumption.

It assumes that life depends not on God's mercy, but on our effort. Look at verse 31. My son, the father says, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

Do you see what the father is saying to the older son? Listen, you're mistaken. If you think, older brother, that your existence depends on your morality, that you have never received grace or you don't need to receive grace from me.

[17 : 46] If you think that all that you have had is what you have earned, you have misunderstood the nature of our relationship. I've been reading a really interesting book over the summer called *Your Only Human* by a guy called Kelly Capic.

He's a university professor in the United States. And in one of the chapters, he tells of an exercise he gives to students as they head home for the summer holidays. The assumption behind his exercise is that at some point in the university holidays, and I know there are some of you here who are on your university holidays, so you can tell me at the end whether this is true, that at some point in your holidays you will get fed up with your family that you have come back to see.

At some point, at some point, your parents will annoy you. They will cramp your style. You will think that they are stupid. You will think they dress terribly and they're embarrassing and they are boring. And Capic tells his students, listen, I've got an exercise for you. When you get home and when you begin to feel like that, what I want you to do is, he says this, it's a bit weird, but listen to it.

He says this, I want you to go and look at your belly button. And he wants you to ask, what is it that you learn from your belly button?

[19 : 06] Now, he is a university professor, so he puts it in more university language. He says, I want you to discuss the ontological significance of your belly button. But it's the same question, right? It's just fancy language.

What do you learn from your belly button? Now, the answer is obvious, isn't it? What you learn is that your body itself is telling you you did not make yourself.

That's what it's saying. Your body is telling you that the story of your life is not and cannot be the story of your own effort and energy. My story, your story, is a story about being given a life that we didn't earn.

My body, your body says you had parents. Your parents had parents who had parents. Your parents, you wore a nappy that needed to be changed. You needed to be fed.

And that in a profound sense, humanity is fragile and grace dependent every moment. Not only in our relationships with one another, but even more profoundly in our relationship with God Himself.

[20 : 08] You see, this is the blindness of religion or of a kind of agnostic self-help. It cannot see, it will not see, that the God who made us gave us everything by his grace.

Our life, our abilities, our health, the place we live, our family, our friends, our money. None of it came from us. We were given it. And so the idea that we can take what we have been given as a gift and we can use it to earn credits is craziness, isn't it?

It's the spiritual equivalent of buying yourself a meal on my credit card and then asking me to pay you back for the meal that you bought on my credit. The God who made us, who formed us, who gave us our bodies, who knows all about us, the idea that he would be spiritually purchased by your desire to wear a particular kind of outfit is craziness, isn't it?

The idea that God would be in your debt, the God who numbers all of your days and gave you all of your time, the idea that you could purchase from him credit by attending church with some of your time is nuts, isn't it?

And Jesus doesn't call it nuts. He says it's lostness. It's the lostness of an older brother. So that's the two brothers. But the other character in the story is the father.

[21 : 32] And what I want you to see as we think about the father is that because of what the father is like, there is good news for lost brothers. If you look down at verse 17, you'll notice the younger brother comes to his senses.

It's not so much, I don't think, in verse 17 that he realizes that his father is merciful and generous. Rather, he realizes, doesn't he, that the pigsty is far worse conditions than any of his father's hired servants.

So he writes a speech. Verse 18, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.

Now, if that's all that was written, you might assume that the younger brother saved himself by becoming an older brother. Sounds like an older brother kind of statement, doesn't it? Make me one of your hired servants.

I'm a slave. I will always obey your orders. But that's not what happens, is it? Look at verse 20. And you'll notice that while the son is still a long way off, the father sees him. Why does the father see him?

[22 : 29] Well, the point is because the father has been looking for him. And as he sees him, he is, verse 20, filled with compassion. The father's heart goes out to the son. And he runs to him, throws his arms around him, and kisses him.

Now, the shock of this, I think, passes us by. But scholars tell you that for a grown man in the ancient Near East to kind of hoik up his robe and expose his legs and run towards a rebellious son, that was not only unheard of, it was shameful.

The boy should have been put on trial. The boy should have been shamed himself, but instead, it's as if the father takes on the shame of the younger son and runs after him, intercepting him before anyone can get to him, embracing him and bringing him home.

And then notice what happens. This is the key to this. Notice that his rehearsed speech, the younger brother doesn't get to give it. He's cut off partway through. Look down at verse 21. The son said to him, here's his rehearsed speech.

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But, notice, the father cuts it in. The father said to his servants, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

[23 : 34] 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. The son isn't able, is he, to get his speech out.

He cannot make a promise of obedience before the father interrupts him with his grace. And notice how the father describes what's happening in verse 24. He describes the story. This is not a lost son coming to his senses and promising obedience. This is a lost son being found. This is a dead son being made alive. This is an unworthy son receiving mercy. And that's what the celebration is about. It's a remarkable picture, isn't it, that Jesus is painting of God here. God, says Jesus, is not distant. He's not cold. He's not disinterested in lost people. Rather, God the father is on the lookout for lost sons and daughters. And he is willing to take on the shame of their sin. [24 : 33] He is willing to run towards them. He's willing to welcome them home. Listen, welcome them home, not on the promise of their obedience, but on the grounds of his grace and his mercy. And more than just that, Jesus says that when sinners return to God like that, there is a great celebration, joy in heaven. Let me say this morning, if you're a younger brother, you need to know, don't you, that there is a gracious father who loves you. And whatever the pigsty that you're in this morning, whatever mess you're in, wherever that has taken you, whatever it is that you have done, what you need to hear this morning from this story is that the Lord reaches out to you to find you and to bring you home. Not on the promise of your obedience, but on the promise of his grace and his mercy. But notice how the father treats the older brother as well. Notice that he reaches out to the lost older brother. Look at the end of verse 28. You'll see that just like the father looked out for the younger brother, waited and watched, now he leaves the party for his older brother too. [25 : 42] This time he doesn't hoik up his robe and run, but he leaves the celebration really for the shame and the misery of the older brother on the outside. He pleads with this older brother to come in. Just like with the younger brother, the father offers him grace and kindness. Come and join the party. Come and celebrate. Come, eat, drink, dance. And then the story ends, doesn't it? We don't know what happens to the older brother. That's the hanging question. Because really the parable is taught by Jesus because he's reaching out to lost older brothers and saying, Listen, will you come? Will you come home? Will you join the party? So maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you're an older brother. Lost in your own good works and your own religion. This is a word of the Lord for you, isn't it? The father is inviting you to leave the lostness of your religion and good works and join the party of his grace. Listen, stop pretending that you made it on your own. [26 : 45] Stop pretending that your work's not his grace. It's what your life is about. It's an invitation, isn't it, from Jesus to you to turn from trusting yourself and turn to him. Don't stay out of the party. But just notice exactly what this repentance will be like for older brothers. Repentance for the older brother is not just saying sorry for the wrong things he's done. Religious people are always sad about the wrong things they've done. And that's how religion works, yeah? Religion makes you feel guilty and then tells you what to do about your guilty feelings. So religious people, they pray about their sin, they weep about their sin, they perform sacrifices for their sin. But if this story is true, what religious people need to be sorry for is not only the wrong deeds that they have done, they also need to repent for the good deeds that they have done. Because repentance means owning the fact that those good deeds have been done for selfish purposes. Do you see that? If I do good things for the purpose of purchasing my salvation, I have done them for my own good and my own benefit, and they have themselves become evil. [28 : 03] And so we need to say, don't we, with the younger brother, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I own it. It was me. It was my fault. I did it. I did it for myself and for my own self-interest. You know, I might not have been wild living like my brother, but I was no better in my heart. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. I've looked, God, and I've concluded that I have nothing to give you. I have nothing to bring to you that you should owe me. I'm not worthy. I repent of my church attendance. I repent of trusting in my good deeds. I repent of trusting in my Christian heritage. I repent of trusting the fact that one day I was baptized, or one day I took the Lord's Supper.

Lord, none of those things can I offer to you. None of those merit your salvation. Sorry, Lord, that I trusted in them. If you've been coming to the Drop-In Community Group on a Wednesday night, we've been running through these parables of Jesus.

[29 : 05] One of the things that we've noticed is that parables kind of work like jokes. Yeah? So jokes have a punchline and a point. They're trying to make one point and make it clearly and well. And that's it here, right? Jesus calls younger brothers and older brothers to repent and come back to a gracious father.

That's the point of the story. But I want, just as we finish, for you to think with me, what does Jesus think will make people repent? How does he call younger brothers and older brothers to repent? What will do this miracle in their hearts, right? What will make the dead sons alive again? What will find the lost? It's interesting, isn't it?

Because Jesus doesn't just stand up and say to everybody, you just need to repent. He does something really interesting in the story. The assumption of Jesus is that it is, as you see the graciousness of the Father, you will be drawn to him.

This is why, you know you can't force anyone to be a Christian. You know that, don't you? You can force someone to become a Muslim. You can force someone to become a Catholic or an atheist even, because you just tell them what to do, and you force them to do those activities.

[30 : 15] And the job is done. But the Christian, the kind of Christian that Jesus is talking about here, comes by not an external change of behavior, but an internal change of heart.

And you can't force that on anyone, can you? Only God can do that. And he does that by showing you his grace and his goodness and his kindness. It's as you see the beauty and glory and wonder of God, that you, in a way, kind of, you fall in love with him and are drawn to him as you see what he's like.

And that's what's going on in this story. Jesus is painting a picture for us of a loving father, a father who loves lost sons, be they younger brothers or older brothers, and draws them to himself, a father who will kill the fattened calf for the wayward son, who will go outside the party to the older brother and draw him in.

Now, of course, it's not just the parable that tells us of the gracious father. The rest of Jesus' ministry tells us that. So we know what's only hinted at in the parable, don't we?

You know, God the father in the parable is sort of leaning on the fence, looking out for his lost sons. But we know that God the father doesn't just kind of lean over the fence and look for them. God the father sends his only son to look for lost sinners.

[31 : 35] God the father sends the son to put on human flesh, to come and look for people like you and me. And in the person of the son, the triune God doesn't just take on the shame of an older brother or a younger brother by hooking up his robe and exposing his legs or by leaving the party.

No, this triune God in the person of the son takes on flesh and dies on the cross, taking the punishment that our sins deserve. Not just the humiliation of leaving a party to speak to a moody brother, but the humiliation of a sham trial, being put outside, not only the glories of heaven, but outside the city in the place of the scar.

You know, in this story that the father absorbs the financial cost and the shame of welcoming his returning son. He gets out the best of his things, doesn't he? The best robe, the best ring, the fattened calf.

And our triune God, father, son and spirit, absorbs the moral cost and the justice of welcoming sinners home through the cross, his death in our place, so that you're not robed with the best robe in the wardrobe or a ring.

You are robed with Christ's righteousness itself, celebrating not just for an evening with a calf, but for all eternity, for a feast.

[32 : 54] And the point is that as we see that, as you see that that's what God is like, you will leave your sin and your lostness, and you will turn back to the father.

You will leave the pigsty, you will drop the self-sufficient religious act, and say to the father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your child, but have mercy on me.

And if you're a Christian this morning, that's your story. And it's not just a story that you start with, it's a grace and a mercy that you depend on every single day.

As we turn to the father and say, it's not because of me and what I've done, it's because of you and what you've done for me. I turn from my sin, and I trust in you. Let me pray.

As we close. Let's close. Let's just take a few moments in our own hearts to pray.

[33:57] Maybe there's a sin that you are holding onto that you need to let go of. Or perhaps for the very first time, turning back to the father who loves lost children.

Amen. Heavenly Father, we don't want to plead anything before you except for your grace and your mercy.

We thank you that you are the father of this story, who welcomes lost children home. Thank you that you welcome us. Thank you that you didn't wait for us to come and turn to you, but you sent your son to find us.

Thank you that he calls out to us, even this morning, showing us your grace and your mercy and your kindness, that we might be drawn back to you. And so, Lord, we love you.

We trust you. We want to live our lives for you, depending every day on your grace and your kindness to us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35:23]