

Parable of the Lost Sons (Luke 15:11-32)

I will not use the parables most common name: The Prodigal Son. It is not right to single out one of the sons as the sole focus of the story. Jesus starts the parable, “a man had two sons”. The narrative is as much about the elder brother as the younger and as much about the father as the sons. The parable might be better called the two lost sons. The over emphasis on one son misses a real important point; both brothers are alienated from God.

Our parable is found as one of three stories Jesus told about lostness. They are introduced to us at the beginning of chapter fifteen in the Gospel of Luke. *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)*

Luke recounts that there are two groups of people who had come to listen to Jesus. First, tax collectors and sinners. These two represent the younger brother. They did not observe the moral laws or the ceremonial purity followed by religious Jews. They engaged in wild living or were not respectable in any way by the current culture.

The second group of listeners were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They studied and obeyed scripture, worshiped faithfully and prayed constantly. The fact that Jesus drew large crowds puzzled and angered this group. They are furious that Jesus welcomed sinners and sat down to eat with them. To sit down and eat with someone in the ancient times was a token of acceptance. Jesus directs his teaching to the second group, the scribes and pharisees. It is in response to their attitude that he tells this parable.

In many churches down through the ages this parable has been taught on how the father freely receives his lost son. The targeted audience for Jesus was not sinners but those who did everything the Bible says. Jesus wants to show these people that their spiritual blindness and self-righteousness was destroying their souls and the lives of the people around them. It is a mistake to think that Jesus tells the story to convince us of God’s unconditional love.

No, the original hearers of this parable did not melt away in tears at the thought of this wonderful God. They were shocked, offended and infuriated. Jesus’ purpose was not to warm our hearts but to shatter our categories. This parable reveals the self-centredness of the younger brother and condemns the elder brother’s moralistic life.

Jesus is radically saying that both the sinners and the religious are spiritually lost. He turns everything on its head about how to connect with God.

It’s hard to realise today but when Christianity first got going in the world it was not recognised as a religion. It was considered non-religious. Imagine the neighbours of the early Christians asking them about their faith. As Timothy Keller puts it, “Where’s your Temple”, they’d ask. We don’t have a temple was the reply. “Where are your priests”? We don’t have priests. Well, “where are your sacrifices made to please your Gods? We don’t make sacrifices like that anymore. They would have said something like this; Jesus himself was the temple to end all temples, the priest to end all priests and the sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

The crucial point here is that religiously observant people were offended by Jesus but those who were estranged from religious and moral observance were intrigued and attracted to him. This is a challenge to the church in the west. Who are we attracting to our churches and will we welcome them openly or look down on them with moralistic eyes.

Jesus's story might be best named the Parable of Two Lost Sons. The lost younger brother and the lost elder brother. The first part of the story begins with a shocking request. The younger brother demands from his father his share of the estate. The original listeners would have been shocked by this request. Entitlements were only exercised at the death of the father. To ask this prior to the father's death would have been seen as wanting his father dead. Essentially, he is saying that he wanted his father's things but not his father.

A traditional response to this kind of request would have been to drive the son out of the family with nothing except some physical violence as he left. However, the father doesn't do anything like that. He gave him what he asked for. The younger brother then, is asking his father to tear his life apart. The father does so for the love of his son. Most of Jesus's listeners would have never seen a middle eastern patriarch respond like this.

The younger brother's plan backfired terribly. He went off and squandered everything he was given through an out-of-control lifestyle. He falls so low that he ends up working with pigs. He decides to return to his father, admit that he was wrong and that he forfeited his right to be his son.

His plan was to ask his father to take him back as one of his hired men so he could earn a wage and begin to pay his father back. When the younger son comes within sight of the house, his father sees him and runs to him. As a general rule, distinguished middle eastern patriarchs did not run. His father does run to him, showing his emotions openly, falls on his knees and kisses him.

This would have taken the younger brother by complete surprise. The father instructs his servants to act quickly and bring the best robe and put it on him. Now the best robe in the house would have been the father's robe. This would have signalled an unmistakable sign of restoring his son and his standing in the family. The father was clearly saying to his son that he was not interested in the son paying off the debt or waiting for him to earn his way back into the family. I am simply going to take you back.

He commands the servants to prepare a feast of celebration which included a fattened calf. Most meals did not include meat as it was an expensive delicacy. What a scene! The message for us is clear; God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore every kind of sin or wrongdoing. God always has grace to spare. There is no sin that cannot match his grace. Like the father, God is waiting for those to return to him and he welcomes all who turn to him with open arms.

In the next part of the story, we will see the cost of that grace and the true climax of this story. When the elder brother hears from the servants that his younger brother has returned and has been reinstated by his father, he is furious. He refused to go in to what is perhaps the biggest feast and public event his father has ever put on. By staying outside, he is publicly casting a

vote of no confidence in his father's actions. This forces the father to come out to speak to his older son, a demeaning thing to have to do when you are the head of the household and host of a great feast.

Why is the older brother so angry? He is especially upset at the cost of everything his father is incurring. "You've never given me even a goat for a party, how dare you give him a calf?". By bringing the son back into the family he has made him an heir again which diminishes the older brother's inheritance. He's worked all this out and realises that he has saved and worked for his inheritance and his brother has done nothing to receive his. Worse than that he actually bought shame to the family by his behaviour and actions.

The older brother objects to what appears to be a complete lack of Justice. He reminds his father that he has never disobeyed him. He's actually saying that he has rights and should have been consulted about this. Further, he refuses to address his father respectfully. He does not say esteemed father but simply -look. In a culture where behaviour is important this would be considered outrageous. A modern-day equivalent might be a son writing a humiliating memoir that destroys his father's reputation.

Now, we wonder how the father will respond to his older son. How will he deal with his open rebellion. What will he do. Well, he responds with amazing tenderness. My son, he begins, despite how you have disowned me publicly, I still want you at the feast. I am not going to disown your brother but I will not disown you either. I challenge you to swallow your pride and come into the feast. It's an unexpectedly gracious and dramatic appeal.

The original listeners would have been on the edge of their seats. Will this family be reunited in unity and love? Will the brothers be reconciled? Will the older brother be softened by his father's appeal? Just as these questions arise, the story ends. Why doesn't Jesus finish the story? This is because his real audience was the Pharisees or older brothers. Jesus is redefining everything they and we thought we know about connecting to God. He is redefining sin, what it means to be lost and what it means to be saved.

In the first part of the story the younger son is alienated from his father, who represents God in the story. The listeners would have all agreed that anyone who lives like that would be cut off from God. In the second part of the story, we meet the older brother who is obedient to his father and therefore has a right relationship with God. He unlike his younger brother is completely under control and quite self-disciplined. So, we have two sons, one bad by conventional standards and one good yet both are alienated from their father. The father has to go and invite both of them to the feast of his love. So, there is not just one lost son in this parable-there are two.

As the story finishes Jesus deliberately leaves the older brother in an alienated state. The bad son enters the feast but the good son will not. We can almost hear the pharisees gasp as the story ends. It was the complete reversal of everything they had ever been taught. Perhaps both brothers lost their fathers love because they both wanted to control that love. One was resentful and left, the other stayed and never disobeyed his father. Each one rebelled, one by being very bad and one by being very good. Both were lost sons but in different ways.

Neither son loved the father for himself. Although both sons are wrong and both are loved, the story does not end on the same note for each. One of the ironies of the parable is now revealed. The younger son's separation from his father was painfully obvious. He left the father literally, physically and morally. The older brother stayed at home and he was actually more distant and alienated from the father than his brother. He was blind to his true condition. He would have been horribly offended by the suggestion that he was rebelling against the father's authority and love but he was deeply doing so. Directing this story to the Pharisees, Jesus is saying that they are more lost than sinners. No one had ever taught anything like this before.

So, what does it mean to be spiritually lost? The younger brother's lostness is clearly seen when he ends up in the pigsty. He has spent all his inheritance, run out of friends and resources because of his indulgent, un-disciplined and foolish life. It led to a complete life collapse. However, Jesus offers up this story to raise the issue of a kind of lostness that is more subtle but just as devastating.

The older brother was also lost. We see that he became angry. He was dripping with resentment. In life many challenges will come our way. If they are not going according to your plan, beware that you don't become angry and bitter. The older brother believed that if he lived a good life that he should automatically get a good life in return. Good deeds in this way do not have value and in themselves but can be a way to control your environment.

The younger brother could have been restored but it came at an enormous cost to the elder brother. Surely the father could not just forgive the younger brother, someone had to pay. However, Jesus does not put a true elder brother in the story, one who is willing to pay any cost to save and seek what is lost. It is heartbreaking. The younger son gets a Pharisee for a brother instead. But we do not.