

A Father and His Three Sons (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” . . .

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them.

¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” (Luke 15:1-2, 11-32)

There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons

- A. Historically, with regard to this parable, the emphasis clearly has been on this younger son, mentioned first in the story.
 1. This is made obvious even in the way we’ve chosen to title it through the years, right? The parable of . . . what? . . . the Prodigal Son. We speak of this parable as if it’s really all about this one son who goes off, lives extravagantly, and then in a miracle of grace, makes his way back to the Father’s house.

- a. The older son, mentioned second in the story here, it would seem, is relegated to nothing but a bit-player, a part of the supporting cast, but certainly not anything to really focus on.
- B. But when we read the story carefully, that is not what we see, is it? There is room to argue, I would say, that there is perhaps even stronger emphasis in this parable on the older son.
 - 1. But we'll have more to say on this next week. For now, I simply want to make sure you see that there are, in fact, two sons here, and they are equally important and worthy of our attention.
- C. We are further confirmed in our understanding here when we consider the context that stands behind the original delivery this parable. This is why I had us read [vv. 1-2](#) in the beginning. We won't be positioned to understand the parable rightly until we see just who the parable was first addressed to. There are two groups here.
 - 1. There are ["the tax collectors and sinners"](#) (v. 1), whom Jesus is receiving and eating with.
 - 2. And then there are ["the Pharisees and the scribes"](#) (v. 2)—some of the religious leadership in Israel at the time. And they are standing back, arms crossed, brows furrowed—amazed, even repulsed, that Jesus would be welcoming and sharing the table with people so immoral and loose—the muck of society, as it were. And these self-righteous, self-important folks are grumbling amongst themselves: ["This man receives sinners and eats with them"](#) (v. 2).
- D. And it's actually in response to this grumbling that Jesus tells the parable here about ["a man who had two sons"](#) (v. 11).
 - 1. Two groups in the audience that day. Two sons in the parable told. He has something to say here, it's quite clear, to both the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes. As we shall see, the younger son stands for the former group and the older stands for the latter.

Longing and Looking

- A. As we make our way now towards the plan for the sermon this morning, let me say that it seems to me that these two sons in our parable (and the two groups of people behind them) really represent the two basic approaches human beings take in their effort to achieve happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment.
- B. This week I simply to look more closely at the approach of the younger, whom I'll still call the Prodigal Son. So we'll be looking at [vv. 11-24](#) in particular. And we'll be making note of three things: (1) His approach to fulfillment; (2) The fallout of that approach; and (3) The way home.
 - 1. And we'll do the same for the older son next week. But let's get to work!

(1) The Approach (vv. 11-13)

- A. If I had to sum up the younger son's approach to fulfillment in a word it would be: self-indulgence. The idea here is immediate gratification. Don't hold back. Get all the pleasure you can as quickly as you can. Just bypass the father and go straight for his stuff.
- B. As we look at what the son does in these verses, what we must first understand is the incredible offense that is taking place here.
1. The father in this parable is clearly well-off. He has much in the way of property and possessions. And it was customary in Israel that upon the father's death, all that he owned would be split between his sons with the firstborn receiving a double portion ([Deut 21:17](#)). So this younger son, then, is due to inherit a third of the Father's property—no small amount indeed.
 - a. And there comes a day, it would seem, when he finally grows tired of waiting for it.
- C. When he comes to his father there in [v. 12](#) and says, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me", as we saw last time, he is essentially saying: "Father, I wish you were already dead. I'm tired of sitting around waiting for you to die. I want your stuff. And I want it now."
1. One commentator puts it this way: "The younger son's request shames both his father and his family. It is a certified public statement that he no longer wishes to live within or be identified by the family. In requesting what should become available only at his father's death, the son is, in effect, writing his father's death certificate. In ancient Jewish society, that was a virtually unforgivable offense" (PNTC).
- D. The Father could have (and, perhaps, should have) driven his younger son out at this point and, in that, saved whatever scraps of his own honor still remained. But he doesn't.
1. Though, no doubt, at this point, in His heart is a strange mixture of sorrow and anger, grief and rage, we are told that he grants his son's request: "And he divided his property between them" ([v. 12b](#)).
- E. And away the younger son goes: "Not many days later [What a painful detail: "Just give your stuff and let me get out of here!"], the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living" ([v. 13](#)).
1. Later, down in [v. 30](#), when the older son is bemoaning the father's generosity, he sums up his younger brother's activity like this: "[T]his son of yours . . . has devoured your property with prostitutes."
 - a. That's what he's doing on the other side of the world. He's longing and looking. And the approach he's taking to fill the void: self-indulgence. If I want it, I get it.
- F. O how many in our city are walking the Prodigal's path?! "Who wants God?! He just puts all these rules on things. He tells me, 'No.' Nobody tells me no. I'm out of here."
1. And they're all busy trying to fill their bellies. But it will leave them empty in the end.

(2) The Fallout (vv. 14-16)

From Freedom to Misery

- A. Let's look at vv. 14-16 now bit by bit: "And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need" (v. 14).
1. There comes a time when this self-indulgent approach to fulfillment and joy will break down. I love what John Piper says on this point: "Running away from God starts by feeling free and ends in utter misery."
 - a. The word there in the Greek translated "spent" (Gk. "dapanao"), can be translated "to spend freely." The idea is that it feels so good to just throw money at stuff and get whatever you want. Don't think about it. Don't balance a budget. Don't worry about the rules. Just enjoy it.
 - i. You're free . . . for a moment. The exhilaration will eventually give way to misery. The freedom will inevitably spiral into slavery.
- B. And that's precisely what we see happens next: "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs" (v. 15). This man who was once so free, is now serving food to pigs.
1. We hear this little detail about pigs and we might think it sounds humbling and gross or something like that. But to a Jew's ears, as their hearing Jesus tell this, we must remember that pigs are not just physically unclean, according to Lev 11:7, they are ceremonially unclean. A Jew should not be handling such creatures, period.
 - a. The fact that this son is in the mud with these pigs speaks not only to his humble place now but also to just the filth he is carrying about in his soul even before God. He's fallen so far. His whole life is a mess!
- C. But it gets worse before it gets better: "And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate . . ." (v. 16a).
1. There's a sort of insanity that ensues. "I thought this life would fill me, now I'm just looking anywhere for anything. Even the pods of pigs are looking good at this point."
- D. But did you catch how the verse ends? ". . . [A]nd no one gave him anything (v. 16b). "Those are for the pigs, boy. Get back to work." "But sir I'm starving." "I don't care if you're starving." Don't you see? Even the pigs are faring better than him. He is utterly empty.
1. The hole he was trying to fill in all of this, is now threatening to swallow him up.

This Is Real Life

- A. This is the downward spiral of sin. And you see it again and again. This is not just a parable. This is real life.

- B. Can I just say, this last week, I was on Facebook, and I don't know why, but somehow I thought of a friend of mine that I hadn't seen post in a while. Now, you need to understand, this guy was a part of the college ministry I led back in SLO. And after he graduated, he just went prodigal. He moved to Vegas and started doing just what this younger son was doing. Insane amounts of sex, drugs, parties. I mean, absolutely reckless. And he would publicize it on his Facebook feed. And whenever he did, it would just break my heart. And I'd pray for him. What's happened to my brother? Sometimes in his posts (frankly, I think it was when he was either drunk or high) he would talk about his struggles still with thoughts of God and the emptiness of his current lifestyle. It would at times seem hopeful. Maybe he's coming around.
1. But then this last week, it just dawned on me, I haven't seen anything from him in a long time. I searched for his name and navigated to his profile page only to see this banner running across the top: "Remembering _____ : We hope people who love [him] will find comfort in visiting his profile to remember and celebrate his life."
 - a. It's a notice put there by Facebook to alert you to the fact that this person is dead. October 28, 1992 - January 09, 2019. 26 years old. Dead. I tried to look into what happened, but everything was vague and sugarcoated. Of course, I have my suspicions. You can only run like he was for so long before it just gives out.
- C. I suppose what I'm trying to say here is: It's a big deal to leave the Father's house. If you are contemplating it, if you are looking to pack your bags and take that journey, you need to know: It's not all fun and games! It's called "the road . . . that leads to destruction" (Matt 7:13) for a reason. Not everyone will escape it. Some will just die right there in the mud!

(3) The Way Home (vv. 17-24)

- A. But that's not how this younger son's story is going to end. Sometimes one of the most loving things God can do is let all your dreams come crashing down.
1. If that's happening in your life right now, I can tell you one thing: God is going after your heart. And I'd encourage you: Open yourself to Him. Let Him in. And if you've been wandering, let Him start to show you the way home.
 - a. This is how I got saved. All of my idols come crashing down. Where else am I going to go? I came back home to God.

The Son's Repentance

- A. Well, that's what starts to happen here. First, in vv. 17-20, we are given four little details that, I think, outline quite vividly for us what is meant by the biblical idea of repentance. Perhaps you've heard we are to repent but not known quite what it is. Well, lean in on this scene with me for a moment and you'll get a good picture of it.
- B. Look at v. 17: "But when he came to himself . . ." Now stop. What an interesting way of describing repentance. It's a coming to one's self. It's a stepping back into reality. It's a step back towards who you really are.

1. The idea here, I think, is actually quite simple. The fact is, all of humanity has been created by God, in the image of God, to be a child of God, to live and move and have our being with God, to do all that we do for the glory God.
 - a. Bottom line: You cannot truly know yourself truly if you do not truly know God. That's the point. Fallen man, wandering off away from God, is something less than human, something less than what God designed.
 - i. So repentance first is an awakening to the reality that you were created to be God's child, that you were created for more than prostitutes and worldly pleasures and pods of pigs. That there is a place called home and this isn't it. It's back with Him.
 - (1) No wonder you've been feeling so alone. No wonder you've been feeling so confused, so hopeless, so empty. You are God's child but you've been living like an orphan, like a slave.
- C. ¹⁷ "But when he came to himself . . . he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.'" Now stop. The second thing we see: He owned his sin.
 1. He doesn't make excuses for it. "I have sinned . . ." You see it. You're broken up about it. You own it. You name it. No more running. No more hiding. No more self-justifying. No more blaming. Just confessing.
- D. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Stop. The third thing we see: He understood his place.
 1. The sinner can make no claim on God's mercy. He doesn't owe it to us. If we could somehow earn it, if we somehow had a right to it, it would no longer be mercy. Repentance admits: "I know it. I'm not worthy. I don't deserve to be your child."
- E. And yet repentance gets up and goes home anyways: "And he arose and came to his father" (v. 20a). That's the fourth detail to bring out.
 1. "I know that I can make no claim on your mercy but I know that you are the type of Father who takes pleasure in showing it anyways." So he gets up and he goes.

The Father's Mercy

- A. And here now we come to what, in my opinion, is the sweetest scene of all—perhaps one of the most moving scenes in all of the Bible. There is so much in these few verses. The view we are given into the Father's heart is breathtaking.
 1. And, you know, what's one of the things that you do when you're on a hike or whatever and you come to just a gorgeous view? You pull out your camera, don't you? You aim it this

way and that way, you take a pic from this angle and that angle. You just try to capture it as best as you can, though you know you never will.

- B. Well, that's what I want to do right now. I want to slow us down here and take five snapshots of this scene. And I'll put a little title under each one, as if we're hanging them up in a gallery on a wall. I want you to see the Father's heart for you, perhaps in a way you never have.

Snapshot #1: The Window's Waiting

- A. I wonder if you noticed this little detail there in v. 20: "And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him . . ." We are almost invited to assume that the Father had been waiting by the window, as it were, hoping, praying, longing for the day that his wayward son might come home.

- 1. That is God's heart for you, wayward son/daughter. He is by the window. He is anxiously awaiting your return. But He does more than just wait, doesn't He?!

Snapshot #2: The Race of Grace

- A. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran" (v. 20). He doesn't merely sit back and wait for the son to slowly step his way to the front door. He can't wait. He is off and running.

- 1. Commentators have long pointed out how unconventional such a thing would be for a patriarch around Palestine in this time. One scholar notes: "It was a breach of an elderly Jewish man's dignity to run" (IVPNTBGC). He would have had to hoist up his robes and bare his legs to do so. He would make a fool of himself. He would open himself up to embarrassment. But you see, the father doesn't care.

- a. His compassion compels Him.

Snapshot #3: The Kiss of Kindness

- A. I suppose, if I were this younger son—if I had wished once wished my father dead, and squandered all he had given on prostitutes and self-indulgence, if I had made him a laughingstock among the villagers and brought shame upon the family name—I don't know if the father running towards me would seem to me like a good thing. I think I'd be scared. "He's coming to strike me, to finally give me what's my due, to put me in my place", or something like this.

- 1. But what a surprise it would be then when, as we read there in v. 20: "[his father] ran and embraced him and kissed him."

- a. No doubt the son still smelled like swine. No doubt there was still mud and muck on his garments. But, again, the father doesn't care.

Snapshot #4: The Invited Interruption

- A. Now, here is perhaps one of the most important observations I will make this morning. Did you notice that the son, as he's making his way home, is rehearsing to himself what he's going to say? Look back up at vv. 17-19: "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

- B. When we come under conviction of our sin, one of the pitfalls that we can stumble into is this idea of paying God back. We get that what we've done is bad—that we've taken from him, that we've squandered His blessings on ourselves and things.
 - 1. But we mistakenly think that, in light of these offenses, we now need to pay Him back, we need to work for Him somehow, if we want to at least be near Him. So we move from license to legalism, from self-indulgence to self-righteousness, from younger brother to older brother stuff, really. "If I'm going to be allowed back in, even on the periphery, I need to work for it. I can no longer be your son. So I guess I'll settle for being your slave."

- C. But the Father won't have it. I call it the "Invited Interruption" there in v. 22. Did you notice it? The son starts to recite the words he'd been rehearsing, but, before he can get to the part about being a hired servant, the father interrupts him: "²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants . . ." And here we come to the last snapshot.

Snapshot #5: The Prodigal Party

- A. "²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate" (vv. 22-24).

- B. I don't have time to talk about the meaning in all of this, but let me at least say one thing. In the embrace and the kiss, I think, we are meant to see that the Prodigal is being restored in relationship as the Father's son. But here with the robe and ring and the shoes we are meant to see that the Prodigal is being restored in status as the Father's son.
 - 1. Do you remember back in [Gen 41:42](#) when Joseph is being elevated from the dungeons to Pharaoh's right hand, what does Pharaoh do? He clothes him in fine linen, and puts a gold chain around his neck and his signet ring upon his finger. It was a change in status.
 - a. And that's the sort of thing that's happening here. The Father is saying: "You are not my slave. You will never be my slave. You are my son. And I want everyone to see it."

- C. That's why the whole scene ends with the killing of the fattened calf and this party. It's estimated that a calf like this could feed 75-100 people, probably the whole village. At a time when eating meat was extremely rare, this was particularly special. And everyone is called in to celebrate!

1. I love the way one commentator sums all this up: “In the feast where ‘they began to [celebrate]’ perhaps the son found some of the solid pleasure he had looked for in vain in the far country” (TNTC). In other words: All that the son had been looking for out there was to be found right here all along at home with his Father. Here is the way to true and lasting fulfillment!

A Third Son

- A. Now, there’s this interesting little detail I didn’t point out back at the beginning when we looked at [v. 11-13](#). And this is where we’ll close.
 1. After the younger son demands his inheritance come to him early—saying, as we saw, in essence: “I wish you were already dead”—there in [v. 12](#) is hidden under the English a stunning word choice. The Greek word translated “property” there in the latter part of the verse—“[And he divided up his property](#)”—is the word “bios”, where we get our words like “biology” and “biography”. It means “life”. It doesn’t just mean “stuff”.
 - a. It means “life”—the Father divided up, ripped apart His life for this sinful, wayward, prodigal son. One commentator puts it like this: “[The father does not simply divide his assets; his skin is in the bequest](#)” (PNTC). He was already showing his son there at the very beginning how far he’d be willing to go to love him.
- B. And, of course, here is where we must remember it is Jesus telling this parable. Here is where we remember that there is another son in the picture, a third son, we could say. The Son of God in its truest sense.
 1. It’s why I titled this sermon the way that I did: “A Father and His Three Sons!” You may have read that and asked: “Three sons? In this parable, there are two sons. Where is the third?!” He’s the One telling the story. And He’s the Son that holds all that we’re reading here together and makes sense of it.
- C. We cannot forget that Jesus is telling this parable as He’s traveling towards Jerusalem where He’s already announced He will suffer many things and be rejected . . . and be killed for the sins of the world ([Luke 9:22](#)).
 1. If we forget this, we are likely to misunderstand the Father’s compassion here. We may mistakenly think He’s the type that just kind of sweeps sin and offense under the rug. He’s a softy. He’s easily won over. He lets you get away with stuff because He “loves” you.
 - a. Now, the Lord is compassionate and gracious and kind, but He is also just. Make no mistake, to be reconciled with Him once more after sinning so grievously as we do, will cost.
- D. But here’s the amazing thing. The Father takes that cost upon Himself. “I’ll pay it. I’ll rip my life apart if it means you can come home. You wanted me to die. Well, that’s just what I’ll do.”
 1. “[For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son \[His life . . . over to death\], that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life](#)” ([John 3:16](#)).

- a. The only perfect Son of God was cast out of the Father's home so that we could be welcomed in.
- b. He was stripped naked and mocked so that we could be clothed and celebrated.
- c. He was given sour wine and a cup brimming with the wrath of God so that we could sit around the table and feast with our Father.
- d. He was forsaken so that we could be found.
- e. He was put to death so that we could live.
- f. So that could come home to God and find our fulfillment in Him once more.
 - i. As Peter puts it: "Christ . . . suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet 3:18a).