

A Father and His Three Sons (Part 2)

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)

The Older Son

- A. This is now our second week looking at what is perhaps one of the most famous texts in all the Bible. Even if you do not know the Scriptures, even if you are unfamiliar with or new to Christianity, you very likely may still have some familiarity with the parable Jesus is telling here.
- B. As we said last week, this parable is about not just one son but two. And each of these sons in the parable really come to stand for the two groups of people in the audience there when he first shared it.

1. In the first group we have the “[tax collectors and sinners](#)” (v. 1). These are those like the younger, prodigal son. They’ve lived recklessly and wastefully but they’re repenting and returning and sitting around the table with Jesus. And Jesus is celebrating with them.
2. And in the second group we have the “[Pharisees and scribes](#)” (v. 2). And they are standing back at a distance, watching Jesus eat with this first group, and they refuse to enter in. They’re grumbling to themselves. Clearly here we have those like the older son (whom I might call the externally religious son). They’re all clean on the outside but something is off in the heart.
 - a. And it’s this older son that we’re going to be focusing in on this morning.

Approaching Fulfillment

- A. Now, I said last time that these two sons in many ways represent the two basic approaches we as human beings take in trying to achieve satisfaction, joy, and fulfillment.
 1. The prodigal son is the poster-child for the approach of self-indulgence. Here the idea is: “I want the world and I want it now. Give me my inheritance. Let me go waste it on everything under the sun. Then I’ll find fulfillment, right?” No. We saw that last week.
 2. But now this week we come to the second approach, the approach of the older, the religious son. Here is the idea not of self-indulgence but self-righteousness and legalism. Here the idea is: “I’m not going to go recklessly after all that stuff. I know better than that. That looks foolish. That looks bad. I’m going to stay right here at home. I’m going to be disciplined. I’m going to obey. I’m going to serve. I’m going to be a good boy. And then, in time, everything I really want will be mine!”
- B. If you notice, it’s the same basic idea for both. They both have these longings and aches and desires. They both think that the things of this world will satisfy and fulfill. They both want the father’s stuff without the father himself. But they each just have different ways of getting at it.
 1. One tries to get the father’s stuff by just straight up taking it. The other tries to get his stuff by obeying and being the good boy. One packs up and heads for the brothel. The other packs up and heads for the church.
 - a. But both sons are lost! The one is lost in his sin. The other is lost in his righteousness. Both are in desperate need of the saving grace of Jesus if they’re ever going to get back home to the God!
- C. Last week’s sermon, you could say, was for those tempted to leave the church and go running after the world. This week’s sermon is for those pressing into the church . . . but for the wrong reasons.
- D. So here’s what we’re going to do. With the Prodigal Son last time we looked at (1) His Approach to fulfillment, (2) The Fallout of it, and (3) The Way Home. This week, we’re going to do the same, only now with this older, Religious Son. So our focus this morning will be on [vv. 25-32](#) in particular.

(1) The Approach (vv. 25-27)

In the Field

- A. So let's take a closer look at this older son's approach to fulfillment, what I've called self-righteousness, or legalism, or empty religion.
- B. Notice, in v. 25 we're already clued into it. The younger son has returned. The father is throwing a party for joy. But where is the older son? "Now his older son was in the field . . ."
1. Jesus' storytelling here is masterful. Here he's signaling the M.O. of the Pharisees and scribes, the older son types. This son is in the field working. That's where he is. Working hard. Being a good boy. Doing what daddy asked. While the prodigal was off recklessly wasting his father's property, the religious son is here faithfully taking care of it.
- C. O he looks so good, so righteous, so clean, doesn't he? But as we keep reading, we get the sense that something is a bit off: "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'" (vv. 25-27).
1. Now there really is something to this. The picture presented here, it seems, is that this older son is somehow the last to know. The whole village has come together. There's an extravagant meal, singing, and dancing, even the servants are aware, and yet, somehow, this son has only come upon the awareness of his brother's return just now.
 - a. Now, don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. The idea is not that the father has been trying to keep this from his older son. That point will become obvious soon enough in v. 28 (where he will actually come out from the party and entreat his son to come in).
- D. The point is that this son, it seems, has been so caught up in his serving and working for the father that he is actually starting to lose touch with the father himself. He may be home, but the sense we get here is that he is perhaps further away than the prodigal ever was. He is near in vicinity but distant in heart.
1. Whereas the father was looking and waiting expectantly for his younger son to return, the older son failed to even notice. The disconnect between father and son is highlighted here. And it will only manifest itself more as the story unfolds.
- E. This is the danger of empty religion. You do things for God to get stuff from God—not because you have a loving relationship with God. And as we shall see, this approach to fulfillment, as with the Prodigal's, will ultimately falter and fail. There will be a fallout. What begins looking pretty good on the outside will end in a mess and leave you miserable and broken, empty and outside the party.

(2) The Fallout (vv. 28-30)

Cracks in the Façade

A. This older son has created this façade for himself: “I’m the good one. I’m the one who listens and obeys.” But this façade is starting to crack. And as we make our way through [vv. 28-30](#) now, I want to quickly identify seven of these cracks, if you will—moving from the more external on in towards the heart of the matter.

1. And, as we look at these, I want you to consider: Do any of these fit me? Do these describe what I’m feeling, what I’m going through? Do I relate to this older son in any way?

Crack #1: Anger

A. The first thing we have to notice is the incredible dissonance that is created between what the father feels about his returned son and what this older brother feels. The father throws a party and there’s “[music and dancing](#)” ([v. 25](#))—joy! But when the younger son hears of this: “[He was angry . . .](#)” ([v. 28](#)).

Crack #2: Comparison

A. And as we read on, we start to see more of why. There’s this comparison taking place. Listen to what he says to his father there in [vv. 29-30](#): “[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!](#)”

1. This older son is looking at how he’s being treated and he’s looking at how his brother’s being treated, and he’s saying: “Wait a minute. Are you kidding me?! He goes off, wastes all of his inheritance, and you throw him a party? I stay here working, faithfully and diligently in the field and I get nothing!” It’s comparison.
- B. Have you ever been there? You prayed for it and it didn’t happen. That person prays and it’s like the heavens open up and God attends to every word. Why not me? If I have to hear another testimony about God’s faithfulness to someone else I’m going to get up and walk out. O I’m so happy for you, but He’s never done that for me.

Crack #3: Accusation

A. This comparison gives way to accusation. You noticed that didn’t you? As he’s comparing what his brother’s getting and what he’s getting, he feels like it’s unfair. He’s angry not just in some general sense. He’s angry at his father. He attacks him. He accuses Him of being unjust, irresponsible with his things, foolish.

1. This is Jesus’ way of touching on what the Pharisees and Scribes were doing about back up in [v. 2](#): [And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”](#) They are grumbling against God in view of the mercy and kindness He is willing to show to prodigal sinners.

- B. It's the same sort of thing with Jonah when the Ninevites repent and God has mercy on them. [Jonah 4:1-3](#): “¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³ Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”
1. “I would rather die than share the table with these Gentiles. I knew you would forgive them and welcome them. I hate that. They don't deserve that. I wanted judgment. You gave them mercy. How about You kill me instead!”
- C. What about you? Have you ever accused God of being unfair—either in the way He chooses to bless another or in the way it seems He's not blessing you? There's something underneath that.

Crack #4: Hyperbole

- A. The next thing to note is the son's use of hyperbole. This is just a nice way of saying that, in his pride, he's going blind to reality. He exaggerates the facts to serve himself.
- B. You see it here in the way he uses the word “never”: “[I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends](#)” (v. 29). Never.
1. “[I never disobeyed . . .](#)” Do you think that's true? He's disobeying the father right now. The father is saying: “Get into the party!” But the son is saying: “No!”
 2. “[You never gave me a young goat . . .](#)” Do you think that's true? The Father is going to respond: “[All that is mine is yours](#)” (v. 31). “I haven't just given you a young goat, I've given you it all.”
 - a. Remember, he's already divided up the inheritance between his boys. The younger son has already wasted his portion. The older son is set to receive everything that remains. But he doesn't see it. He feels cheated. He's going blind.

Crack #5: Hardness

- A. But he's going more than blind. He's going hard. He's turning to stone. I wonder if you noticed that tragic little detail there at the beginning of v. 30. Listen to how the older son speaks of his brother: “[But when this son of yours . . .](#)” Did you hear it?
1. The word choice of the older brother here seems to indicate he can't even consider some sort of relational tie between him and his younger brother. He can't even bring himself to call him his brother. “[T]his son of yours.” “If you want him, fine. But I'm disowning him. I would never associate with let alone celebrate such a person. As far as I'm concerned, he's out of the family. As far as I'm concerned, we don't share genetics. I could never do what he's done. He belongs back out there with the pigs!”
- B. Let me ask you: When you see someone in sin do you feel mostly disdain and disgust, or do you feel compassion? Does your heart harden towards them, or does it break for them?

1. When you see folks on TV doing their LGBTQ thing, do you want to throw up in your mouth and change the channel—“That’s disgusting!”—or do you weep? Would you protest if Jesus rolled into town, walked right past you, and sat down around a table with them? Because that’s the sort of thing my Savior would do!
2. When you see folks lobbying for abortion rights, does that just get you hot under the collar?! “It’s murder. You people are despicable human beings.” It is murder. It is despicable. But if we truly know our God, there should be something of compassion in our hearts for them. “God has so much more for you than this!” Jesus would move towards them. Are you?

Crack #6: Slavery

- A. With Crack #6, now we’re starting to get closer to the heart of the matter. What’s going on underneath the anger, and comparison, and accusation, and hyperbole, and hardness? What’s happening in this older son’s heart?
- B. Well, we’re given window into it with what he says back up there in v. 29. Look at it once more: “[Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command . . .](#)” The older son is really showing his cards here. He exposes what’s going on inside—how he’s really been viewing his relationship with his father.
 1. The first thing to note is that he’s been counting the years: “[these many years](#)”. When God doesn’t have your heart, you are always counting, calculating, putting in your time, punching the clock. You’re willing to do it, but only if it gets you what you really want.
 2. The second thing to note is his use of the word “[served](#)”. In the Greek it’s the word *douleuo*, which means “[to serve as a slave](#).” “The many years I have been serving you as a slave!” This is not the warm, affectionate relationship as between a son and a father. This is a cold, transactional relationship as between a slave and his master.
 3. Which is why he goes on next to speak of the father’s “[command\[s\]](#)”. “You command, I do. That’s how this relationship works. I’m a slave in this house, working to get what I want, working to get my wage. So where is it? Pay me what you owe me.”
- C. Is this how you’ve been operating with God? Is this why you’re in church this morning? Are you just putting in your time hoping to get something from Him? Is God a means to an end, or is He the end for you?

Crack #7: Idolatry

- A. At the end of the day, what we really have here is what the Bible calls idolatry.
 1. And the irony in all of this is that the man who was convinced he had broken no commandments is ultimately shown to have broken the first and most significant of all: “[2 I am the Lord your God . . . 3 You shall have no other gods before me](#)” (Ex 20:2a, 3). Or as

Jesus puts it in [Mark 12:30](#): “[Y]ou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

- B. Love—a relationship of love as between child and father. But there is no love here for anything but the Father’s stuff.
 - 1. You caught that right? “[Y]ou never gave me [what?] a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends” ([v. 29b](#)). Again, the Father has been reduced to a master, an employer, a dispenser of goods. “I’ll work for You to get that paycheck. But I don’t care about You.”
 - a. As one commentator remarks on this: “It is important to note that the coveted celebration of the older son does not include the father” (PNTC).
- C. So again, what we come to find, is that, though this older son will have nothing to do with the younger son, he is much more like him than he is different. He too has been after the father’s stuff without concern for the father himself. He too is left unfulfilled and empty in the fallout. He’s left pouting on the porch outside the party.

(3) The Way Home (vv. 31-32)

The Same Four Things

- A. So if you’re the older son, if you’ve been doing the religious/church thing, trying to barter with God, and you’re noticing the anger and the comparison and the hardness and all that—what do you do to get out of it? What’s the way home?
 - 1. Well, last time, with the Prodigal Son, back up in [vv. 17-20a](#), we identified four things involved in genuine repentance and returning home to God. I don’t know if you remember them but they were: (1) Come to yourself; (2) Own your sin; (3) Acknowledge your place; and (4) Enter freely in!
 - a. The prodigal came to himself, he said I have sinned, he understood that in light of what he’d done he was not worthy to be called a son, and yet he went home anyways and the Father welcomed Him in lavishly.
- B. Well, what we now come to find is that it’s precisely these same four things that the father is attempting to get at with his older religious son here. And he would be after it with us as well.
 - 1. Let’s look at them one by one:

(1) Come to Yourself

- A. The first word the father says in his response to all these accusations and things is what? “[And he said to him, ‘Son . . .’](#)” ([v. 31](#)).
 - 1. He’s inviting his boy to come to himself. “You’re not a slave. And I’m not your master. What’s happened here? You’re my son. I’m your dad. And I love you.”

B. That's the first thing he says to his boy here and it's the first thing he'd say to you. When you've lost your way trying to play this religious game, trying to barter with God, work for God to earn blessing, you've forgotten who you are, who you've been created to be, who I now want to redeem you to be once more.

1. He has so much more for you than you could ever know. Why are you setting your heart on a few of His goats when you can experience intimate communion with Him?

(2) Own Your Sin

A. The father goes on: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (v. 31).

1. Here again is the father's gentle countering of what the son claimed earlier—that he'd been given nothing. "Son, you're not seeing things rightly here."

- a. But he goes further doesn't he. He's saying, "Son not only are you not seeing that I'm freely giving you everything, you're not seeing me, that I'm right here with you. You're not valuing me."

B. I think tucked within these tender words here, there's an invitation for the son to confess he's gotten it backwards. The father wants him to own his sin. "I've traded you for your stuff and, in so doing, I've lost both. If I loved you, if I valued you above all your stuff, well then I'd have all the stuff that I need—because you'd be caring for me like a good dad."

(3) Acknowledge Your Place

A. The father goes on: "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (v. 32).

1. You remember how the older son disowned and separated himself from his brother earlier when he called him: "This son of yours . . ." (v. 30a). "I'm not like him. I'm not related to him." Well, here the father gently corrects that hardness and arrogance when he says: "this your brother was dead, and is alive."

B. He's reminding him of at least a couple of things here:

1. First: "He's your brother. We're family."
2. But secondly, I think he's saying: "Listen. You are more like him than you were first willing to admit. You both have left me in your own ways. You're not something separate. You are related. You are both cut from the same cloth. You're in just as much need of my grace as 'this your brother' is. And the invitation here is to acknowledge that."

(4) Enter Freely In

A. And then, finally, we recognize that ultimately what the father is trying to do is get his older son to come into the party.

- B. It's really amazing when you think about it. This older son has really dishonored his father at this point. While the whole village has turned out for the father's party, his own son is refusing to enter in.
1. But the father doesn't march out of the party, scold his son, and strong arm him into obedience.
 - a. No, he comes out tenderly, entreating. In the same sort of way that he went out for the prodigal, now he comes out in pursuit of the religious, the self-righteous, the hypocrite. And he's saying: "Get in here! Why would you stand here protesting on the porch, when there's a feast right inside these doors?"
- C. But the older son is facing a dilemma here. For him to come into the party, it would mean he'd have to open his heart up to grace. It would mean he'd have to take a seat beside his brother and admit he too needs the father's forgiveness. It would mean that he'd have to stop serving the father in his pride and humble himself and let the father serve him.
- D. You know, one of the most amazing summary statements of the gospel comes in [Mark 10:45](#): "[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
1. What this means is that, at a fundamental level, God doesn't need your service, you need His. And you cannot become a Christian, you cannot come home to God, you cannot find deep and lasting fulfillment, unless you first let Jesus (the "third Son" here standing outside this parable) come and serve you.
 - a. For the prodigal such service and love felt too good to be true. I'm too filthy. I don't deserve that, I've been so sinful.
 - b. But for the externally religious son, such service and love is an offense, it's belittling. I don't need Jesus to clean me up. I'm not dirty. I don't deserve to be treated like this, I've been righteous. I don't need your handouts. I've got it.
 - i. But in either case, if they refuse Jesus' service they will never get home.
 - (1) For this older son, on that cross, Jesus took the beating he deserved for his hypocrisy, his idolatry, his belittling of the Father's honor, his trading of the Father's glory for a goat. He took it on behalf of the older son, so that He could then come down off of that cross and invite him and those of us like him into the party.
- E. Stop playing the religious game. Stop pretending you are righteous and clean. Stop protesting on the porch. And come in. Let Him serve you!