

**Parables of Jesus// Portraits of the Kingdom  
Part Seven - Lost and Found**

**August 18, 2024  
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**Luke 15:11-32**

Jesus introduces the story by saying “there was a man who had *two sons*.” And these brothers represent for us two of the common ways that people approach life – two ways people seek happiness and fulfillment.

**Luke 15:1-2:** “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him.<sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

**The people around Jesus:**

1. **The tax collectors and sinners.** Their lives are marked by an obvious and outward rebellious type of lifestyle. These are represented by the “younger brother” in the parable.
2. **The Pharisees and teachers of the law.** And when they see how Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners, they begin muttering, grumbling about it. They are emphatically opposed to what Jesus’ generosity to the moral and religious outcasts. They are represented by the “elder brother” in the parable.

Tim Keller, in his book *The Prodigal God*, argues that many churches today tend to draw in people who are conservative, buttoned-down, and moralistic. While those who are the “free-spirited”, maybe even licentious, or the broken and marginalized – they often avoid church.

But why is that? Could it be that if the sort of people that were gathering around Jesus are not gathering in some churches today, maybe it’s because they aren’t declaring the same message Jesus taught, aren’t demonstrating the kind of mercy and compassion Jesus showed?

**Act One: *The Younger Brother***

The fact that the father sees his son, “from a long way off”, well, I think this dad was actively keeping watch for his boy. And out of love for his son, this father completely shames himself by lifting his tunic and bearing his legs so that he could “run” to meet his son.

In that culture, it was utterly disgraceful for a man to bear his legs and run. Children would run – women might run. But not men. But this dad does. This dad runs.

**I. We See the Heart of God.**

Jesus would “shame” himself to welcome back the lost, eating with those who had obviously lived apart from God’s ways. After all, that’s exactly what the Father is like.

“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and now is found.” – **Luke 15:22-24**

The *robe*, the *ring*, the *sandals* – all of these are symbols of sonship – a way to say, “You are my son. You still belong.”

Here God is this Father...the one who waits, and watches, longing for your return. God is the one who shames himself to receive us back.

### **Act Two: The Elder Brother**

Remember what prompted this parable in the first place? It’s the grumbling of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. We need to see how at this point in the story, they were not filled with sentiment and warm fuzzies. Their eyes aren’t watering like mine. They were infuriated.

<sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' – **Luke 15:28-30**.

The whole community would be at the party, so the older son’s refusal to join the celebration would amount to a public vote of non-confidence in the decision of the father. He’s saying, “You are wrong for throwing this party. Shame on you.”

The elder brother heart feels the right to have control over the father – to be able to decide for the father what should or should not be celebrated.

#### **How does the father respond to this shaming by his older son?**

Just like he did with the younger brother. The father, out of love and compassion, “went out” to him. He left the party. As the host of the party, to leave would be publicly humiliating. He is shamed by running to his younger son, and now he is shamed leaving the party for his older son. The father pursues both. He goes to his older son, and “pleaded with him.”

## **II. We See Ourselves**

On the one hand, younger brothers are alienated from God through their rebellion – by being very, very bad.

But elder-brother types are alienated from God by being very, very good. They may act in very upright and moral ways, but the true intention of the heart isn’t just to love and honor and serve God. Not to be near God.

No. It’s also self-interest. It’s a way to feel superior to others. Moral behavior can even become a way to try and put God in our debt: to say, “I’ve obeyed and done everything right, now you owe me.”

In both the case of the younger brother and the elder brother, they wanted what the father had to give them, but not the father himself.

They both wanted to control their own lives – apart from their father – but they went about it in different ways.

**Jesus helps us see that sin is not just “breaking all the rules”, but “displacing God in your life as Saviour and Loving Leader.”**

#### **Younger Brother and Elder Brother Types:**

The real problem of sin...the problem for all of us...is with the heart. And sin, at its heart, is “self-centeredness.”

- For *younger brother types*, they seek to indulge their self-centeredness through the path of “self-discovery” in the name of “freedom from all constraint.”
- For *elder brother types*, they pursue self-interest, not by breaking all the rules, but by keeping them diligently. They believe that their good behavior has earned them the right to call the shots and leads to a sense of anger and superiority toward anyone who doesn’t live up to their standards.

### **III. We Hear an Invitation to Receive the Father’s Love**

<sup>31</sup> "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" – **Luke 15:31-32**

Notice: Jesus leaves this story open ended. This is a staggering move. Why not tell us what the elder brother does? Because Jesus is inviting the Pharisees – the elder-brothers in his audience – to make a decision about what they will do. He draws a line and says, “Won’t you come in? Won’t you come to Father? Won’t you celebrate the grace of God in the lives of others?” He’s pleading with them. And he’s pleading with us. asking us what we will do.

“My son – my daughter – you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”

We act like this elder brother when we forget the proximity and generosity of our Father. When we forget that we are his beloved – “My son, my daughter.”

### **IV. We Receive a Summon to Join God’s Mission**

The elder brother would receive two thirds of the inheritance to keep the family together – to manage the interests of the father and the family. But the elder brother in this story doesn’t say: “Father, I will go and bring my younger brother home – even if it comes at great expense to our estate.” No. This elder brother stays home and becomes angry when the younger brother is received back.

Could it be that Jesus puts a “poor example” of an elder brother in this story to highlight what a true-elder brother would have done?

We have a True Elder brother – Jesus – who leaves his heavenly throne in pursuit of his “lost brother” – in pursuit of us.

Jesus, the True-Elder brother, who lays aside his glory and status to go in search of us. He pays the debt for us. He is stripped, so we could be clothed. How do you respond to that? We are called to be those who – like the True Elder Brother, Jesus – who join this costly calling of finding lost things and bringing them home.

**Reflection Questions:**

Take a few minutes to read this story again and sit in particular with the description of how the father pursues and speaks with each of his sons.

1. As you consider the two sons in this story, in what ways do you relate to the ways that they were alienated from their father – the younger by outward rebellion, the elder by inward resentments and superiority?
2. As you consider how the father has compassion on them both – goes out to meet them both, even shaming himself to do so – what do you need to see of his compassion towards you again today?
3. As you consider how Jesus is a “True Elder Brother”, who leaves the glory of heaven and at great expense to himself pursues and finds us, how might you more deeply adopt this same “missional” approach to life?

Take some time to respond to the love of the Father for you.