

Part 56: The Prodigal Son(s)

Tyler Velin | Luke 15:11-32

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I once heard a seminary professor ask another what his “sugar stick text” was. Neither I, as the listener, or the other professor knew what that meant. So professor explained that a "sugar stick text" was the sermon that you always hold in your pocket that you can't wait to take out and enjoy. It's the sermon that if you were randomly called on to fill a pulpit on short notice that you would immediately reach for.

Today's text, is my "sugar stick text." I've used this text at every funeral I've ever lead, and if I keel over here today, it's the text I want one of you to read at my funeral. I'm sure I end up sharing it every year with the Grizzly Football team as their chaplain. I've used it with college students and in guest pulpits. I've preached from it at weddings and bits and pieces of it have been used here at Sovereign Hope. But today marks the first time where I get to address it in its specific context as we've been working through the book of Luke.

You are probably familiar with the text, it's the parable often called, "The Prodigal Son." This is a passage that most people in your neighborhood are aware of whether they are Christian or not. And you might think that because I've used and loved this text so much, that you're going to get my best sermon today, and I'm here to tell you that you're probably wrong.

Here's why. Each time I preach it, I preach it differently. Why? Because each time I look at it, I see something I've never seen before. I discovered that this text is often called the "evangelium in evangelio" that is a “gospel within a gospel.” It's good news upon good news in the story of good news, given by Jesus who is himself the good news.

One commentator said "Nearly everyone who wrestled seriously with this text ends up with a sense of awe at its inexhaustible content" (K.E. Bailey).

This text is so profound because whoever you are, wherever you are, and whatever you've done, you can find yourself in this parable. But the Bible is not primarily about you understanding yourself. Because we are made in the image of God the only way we can understand ourselves is to understand the God who made us and who has set forth to redeem us in love from our sins. This passage so beautifully outlines the nature and character of our Triune God while also drawing out our own experiences of guilt, grace, repentance and hypocrisy.

What we are going to do today is walk through the parable of the prodigal son and we are going to see it in four movements. First we are going to see **Lousy Sons and a Loving Father** (vs. 11-12), then we will follow the younger son as we see **The Straying son and the Father**, in verse 25 we begin with the older brother and read about **The Staying Son and the Father**, and lastly, you'll love how robust this point is, we will look at our final point: **Jesus**.

To begin, let's remember the context of Jesus' teaching. **Luke 15:1-2**, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

The Pharisees were disgusted at the company Jesus kept and knowing this, Jesus gives three parables on lost-ness, joy and repentance. Last week we saw the lost sheep and the lost coin, but today Jesus ties it all together in this stunning teaching.

But this parable isn't merely about the prodigal son. It's actually about the prodigal sons. And this is what we see in our first point today: **Lousy Sons and a Loving Father**.

Jesus opens in verse 11 stating: There was a man who had two sons. Notice how Jesus introduced this family in **Luke 15:12**, "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." Notice already that this isn't a story about "him" but about "them."

To understand the scandal of both sons here, we need to understand a bit more about inheritances in a Middle Eastern context. Kenneth Bailey is an expert in Middle Eastern studies and he said that for over 15 years he traveled all over the Middle Eastern and Oriental world asking people about the implications of the younger son's request here.

He said the conversations typically went like this: "Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?" "Never!" "Could anyone ever make such a request?" "Impossible!" If anyone ever did, what would happen?" His father would beat him of course!" "Why?" "This request means--he wants his father to die!"

Indeed that's exactly what the younger son is doing. Traditionally the inheritance was to be split up on the Father's death bed. In some instances it was allowed that a contract be written up for the day of death, but none of the inheritance, the land, the money or the property would be signed over to the sons until the father died.

So when the younger son comes to his father and asks to cash out, he is quite literally saying, "I don't care about you, you're better off to me dead. I don't want you, I want what you can give me."

This might seem like a harsh statement, but it's one that each and every one of us had made at some point to our own heavenly Father. In **Romans 1**, Paul says, "For although we knew God, we did not honor God or give thanks to him," he says in verse 22, "claiming to be wise, we became fools and exchanged the glory of God" for the glory of physical, temporary, fragile things. The younger brother exchanged the relationship with the father, for the relation-less riches of the father.

He did so with great boldness. There are people who have said to the Lord and to his church, "I'm tired of living in this place. Give me what I need to enjoy this world on my own. Let me find a better land."

You might say, "I've never had those kind of thoughts about God." But the point of Jesus' parable is that this robbing of God doesn't always look the same. In fact out of the gate, the older brother is implicated in the process as well. We will see this more as Jesus continues, but in Middle Eastern cultures the older brother would have had two moral obligations in light of the younger brother's request.

First, he would have been responsible to defend his father's honor and chastise the violence of his brother's request. Second, he would have carried the responsibility to act as the mediator between the two parties, striving to bring peace back into the relationship.

But don't miss what Jesus said in verse 12: the property was divided between them. Though it was the younger brother who was the most bold, the older brother was fine to benefit from it. No one loved the father. Both were self-interested. Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, Eve ate, and Adam was silent.

Despite all this, in a sort of mysterious generosity, the father obliges and splits his property between the two.

Jesus' story now follows this younger brother. Here we see our second point: **The Straying Son and the Father.**

Verse **13** tells us not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country.

We learn four things about the younger son's journey here. We see he went quickly, he went with conviction, he went cross-culturally, and it went catastrophically.

He went quickly. In an agrarian culture most of the son's inheritance would have been land or animals. The time it would take to actually sell off these things for what they are worth would have taken months at best. But within a few days, he sold the father's possessions for pennies on the dollar. He couldn't wait to get out.

He also went with conviction. He took everything with him. He didn't leave some clothes in the closet like your kid might when they go off to college. He had no intent of coming back. He was convinced to never return again.

And we see that his journey took him cross-culturally. He didn't travel to another Jewish town with a desire to meet a nice Jewish woman and raise nice Jewish kids while they reaped and waited on God's Jewish promise. He forsook all of that and traveled to a faraway country. He walked away not only from his father, but from his father's faith. It wasn't only a change of scenery, it was a change of worldview.

But what's interesting, and what still happens today, is that he took pieces of the father's world and still expected them in a far-away country. We do this all the time, we want to avoid the rule of the Christian God, but we want the realities of the Christian God. It's not that we don't want love, grace, compassion, generosity and justice...it's just that we don't want them to come tied to the God of those things.

But what we don't realize is that at their core those experiences are not naturally occurring. They exist because they are tied to the character of our creator God, or in this story, our faithful father. And when we run from God, attempting to find the things that only exist inside of God, it often only goes one way: catastrophically.

That's what happens here isn't it. He spends all he had and in that very moment, a famine came. Jesus tells us in verse 14, "that he began to be in need."

Now don't miss this. This man ran away from the father into the world in order to satisfy what he perceived as a need. But instead the opposite happened. The world didn't satisfy his need, it exposed it.

In fact where he sought to find freedom the result was slavery. He hired himself out to a Gentile, who stuck him in the fields with the pigs.

So what is going on here? Well in a direct contrast to what he hoped to find, this son found emotional and physical pain. Emotionally, he realizes he's not a freeman, he's not the captain of his own soul, but he's just as dependent as he's always been. Moreover the person who he is dependent on has no care for him. He's just the foreign run away who is stuck out with the pigs all alone.

But second, there was physical pain. Here he sat in a twist of irony, among pigs who even for a backsliding Jew would have still carried a repulsive weight to them. And more than that they ate to their full, and he desiring anything to eat, had nothing. Why? Because no one gave him anything.

Remember a few weeks ago, Jesus spoke about hell in the same way. He said in hell you will miss out on the promise of God that you relationally hoped for and you will find eternal pain in weeping and gnashing of teeth. This famine, is the destiny of each and every one of us. Unless something happens.

And what happened to this son? I love how Jesus puts it in **verse 17**: He came to himself, he had a coming to one's self. And he came to himself because of what he knew about his father. He says to himself, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger."

What we are seeing here in story form is the anatomy of the early stages of conversion. Conversion is by the grace of God, coming to your own senses by realizing everything in light of the Father. That's what this man does. Here he is, hired to a citizen of another country only to think about what life would be like if he were hired as a servant by his own father.

Christianity more than anything is simply the hope of returning. God created us, sin ruined us and exiled us in a faraway country, and our only hope is that we might somehow, return.

It clicked in this guy's head that what made the father's house so great was not the gifts of the father, but the father himself. To even have daily provision as a slave in the father's house was better than the best life outside of it. As the **Psalmist says**, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." (Ps. 84:10).

So what does he do? He resolves to go back. And after two parables defining the joy of repentance, we see again what repentance looks like: repentance is a change of heart and a change of direction. We see that in this little speech he rehearses: **(vs. 18-19)** "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

The gospel is not for those who never wander, but for those who always return. In thinking of the goodness of his father, he realizes his sin, resolves to go back, and walks back the same path but this time with empty hands.

But now we see what the father does. This is astounding. I can't understand this, can you? We can read it and comprehend it. But can you really understand it? Read with me again what happens: **Luke 15:20-24**.

Now contextually, the way in which the son left, and stole from the father, would have been a sort of defrauding of the whole community. When the son came back into town, the son who just took a good Jewish fortune and spoiled it in a Gentile land, would have been shamed and rejected. But what did the father do? He saw him from a long way off, he felt compassion for him, he ran to him, he embraced him and he kissed him.

When we come back from the field, we are owning up to our sin and our shame. But we do not walk that path alone. We have a father who walks with us. We have a father who indicates to all who might scoff, that the son has been received back with joy.

The puritan Stephen Charnock says, "**He is the true Father who has a quicker pace in meeting than the prodigal has in returning, who would not have his embraces and caresses interrupted by his confession. The confession follows, does not precede, the father's compassion. How does he rejoice in having an opportunity to express his grace, when he has prevailed with a rebel to throw down his arms and lie at his feet, and this because 'he delights in mercy.'**"

Remember the speech the son rehearsed? Notice how two things changed when he met the Father. First, the primary movement was not the son's mouth to confess, but the father's heart to kiss.

We can't miss this. Because the affection of the father doesn't eliminate our confession. But it changes it. Look back at **Luke 15:18-19**, his first speech was: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

But what did he say here? **Luke 15:21**, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

What changed? The son didn't ask to be made a hired servant. You see, just like us, our hope in grace is still often rooted in legalism. We know the nature of the father is to forgive, but to make it right we still need to pay him back, we need to repay all that we have stolen from him and maybe then we can be a bit more than a slave.

But when the father kissed the son, when he was met with the embrace of affection the request vanished. It vanished not because the son suddenly realized his crime wasn't a big deal. It's not because the debt of his rebellion was any less. But instead when he realized the full weight and wonder of the father's character he realized he could never repay the wrong he had done.

Our sins cannot be repaid. The debt is too high. True repentance, true salvation can only come with dirty hearts but empty hands. In light of this the father immediately upon this confession bestows on him not the towel of a servant, but the robe of sonship and the ring of the family crest. The son left hoping to be freed from his sonship, but in the end he is saved by his sonship.

And the father throws a party. A big one. And he invites everyone.

But it's here where we see the next saga of this parable: **The Staying Son and the Father.**

Meanwhile, the older brother, the one who stayed with the father hears the commotion and asks a servant boy what is going on. The boy responds in **vs. 27**, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound."

And what's the response of the older brother? He's angry. He's so angry that he refuses to go into the feast.

The father comes out and talks to him, and we see why the son is so angry: **(vs. 29-30)** "Look, old man, 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. But when this son of your came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes you killed the fattened calf for him."

Do you see it now? The second prodigal son. In vs. 15 the younger son was enslaved out in the field of a foreigner. But in vs. 25 we are introduced to the older brother who was enslaved in the field of his father. Both were lost in the fields. He stayed. But his heart was never there. The younger brother left to spend the father's resources with those far away. But what was in the heart of the older brother, why did he stay, why did he obey, why did he slave away? So that someday he could spend the father's resources with his own friends. Both brothers only wanted the father's riches not his relationship.

Here Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees, or for us today, he's rebuking any of us who always see the prodigal as someone else. He's showing us that sometimes our seemingly Christian and religious obedience and nearness to Jesus is just a cover-up. Often our proximity and our piety is not to enjoy God, but it's to enjoy our own self-righteous privileges. If we live that way, grace for gross sinners will always be offensive to us because why should they get what we worked hard to earn for ourselves!

Tim Keller, who just passed away last month, says this: **"Neither son loved the father for himself. They both were using the father for their own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by keeping all of them diligently. It's a shocking message: Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God."**

There's not one prodigal here. There's two. One strayed. One stayed. But both had hearts that failed to treasure the father. Both sought to leverage their own efforts in order to gain from the father what can never be found apart from him.

Just as the father went out to meet the straying son, he went out to the staying son and that's exactly what he reminded him of: **(vs. 31-32)**, "Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found."

As straying prodigals or staying Pharisees we must lay down all our efforts, all our hopes of reward in this world, all the comfort of self-righteousness and realize that if we have the Father, we have everything we need. We have no lack.

Now in theological circles, this story actually gets a lot of heat because while it seems to be a beautiful picture of salvation, there's no cross. There's forgiveness and acceptance, but there's no atonement.

But this is where our last point makes everything so clear: **Jesus**. That's it. That's the last point.

Now maybe you're here saying, "Where is Jesus in this story, I don't see him." That's exactly the point.

Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees who take the mantle of being the older brothers who never sinned and who disparage those who come from places far away. But what this parable goes to show by silence is what the older brother should have done.

I'm indebted to Ed Clowney and Tim Keller for seeing this in the text but it's so obvious when we see it. Ed Clowney puts it this way: **Jesus steps off stage and replaces himself with a Pharisee. The full force of the parable comes when we reverse that substitution. What should the elder brother have done? Jesus, the true elder Brother, not only sits with prodigals at heaven's feast, but comes seeking them down the roads of far countries to find them in their pigsties. The gospel itself is the story of the seeking Savior who knows the Father's love. If mission is lost, the gospel is lost."**

Remember the younger brother cashed out on his right to the father's property. He spent it all. Which means everything the father used to accept the prodigal: the ring, the robe, the BBQ calf, all of that rightfully belonged to who? The older brother.

In the story of your salvation the only way the father can welcome, kiss and robe you with the affirmation you need to be a son is because he knows your older brother has not only come down to save you, but it is in his joy to share his own inheritance with you.

He gives us the robes of his righteousness and through his work on the cross, brings us back to the father. As Paul says in Romans 8 we are fellow heirs of God, with Christ.

He's the only way this story works. He's the only way you can come back to the house of the father and know there's anything left for you. That's who Jesus is. He's the older brother who rejoices when we take what was never ours to return home.

Did you notice how the older brother spoke to his father? He said, "when this son of yours came home..." The older son couldn't even call the prodigal his brother. He's just "this son." But what does the father say back to the older son (**vs. 32**), "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found."

The author of Hebrews says in chapter 2 that because of the power of the cross, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers.

When we begin to see ourselves as the prodigal, even the prodigal who stayed in our own self-righteousness, then we can begin to see and treat everyone else like Jesus does. We move towards our own brothers by calling them back, and bringing them in.

Make no mistake, as we grow in becoming an evangelistic church you will feel at times like the older brother. When others come, it may mean seasons of lack. Sharing the gospel may give you less comfort. Talking about Jesus with your co-worker will give you less ease. When sinners come into this church and are saved by grace it might mean that you get a little less attention. It might mean that the care and counsel you were getting might for a time be given to another. It might mean that the seat you always sit in will be filled by another. It might mean that you have people in your community group who don't look like you or act like you. It might mean that as lost and broken sinners come in, your time is spent moving towards their messes and treating their wounds.

But when they come, we count it as no loss at all in order to gain a brother or a sister.

Because Christ has sought and shared with you, we seek and share with others. Why? Because we can't lose what Christ has gained. For on account of him, nothing in this world can separate us from the love of the Father. We have been dead, and now we are alive. We have been lost, and we have been found.