

# The Father of Two Lost Sons

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** God rejoices whenever a sinner returns to Him in repentance.

Have you ever noticed how many children's films are about the main character being separated from a father? Some examples: *An American Tail*, *Finding Nemo*, *Annie*, and *Home Alone*.

Stories of separation and reunion, longing and fulfillment, exile and return strike a chord in our hearts. Why? Because these stories, in one way or another, mirror the great story of the world, in which sinners who are lost and in bondage need to be found and set free.



What books or movies about someone who is lost being found do you like most?

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Why do these stories resonate with us?

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In this session, we will study Jesus' famous parable of a loving father with two lost sons. In the characters' attitudes and actions, we see a picture of human sinfulness, the grace-filled posture of God, and the deadliness of self-righteousness. Like the original listeners of this parable, we are called not to resent God's grace but to celebrate God's goodness in embracing any sinner who repents.

## 1. Like the younger son, we've rebelled against our Father and squandered His good gifts (Luke 15:11-19).

*<sup>11</sup> And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

*<sup>17</sup> "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!' <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."'"*

In the culture of Jesus' day, it was normal for sons to assume that upon their father's death, they would gain a sizeable inheritance, comprising the family's assets and property. But in Jesus' parable, the younger son demanded his portion early. Today's equivalent would be a teenager spitting in his dad's face and screaming, "I want you dead!" Asking for the inheritance early insinuated that the son couldn't wait for his father to die. He wanted what his father could give him now, even at the expense of their relationship.

A bigger shock follows—The father gave the younger son what he asked for! In fact, he actually gave *both his sons* their inheritance ("between them," v. 12). In those days, the older son would be expected to build a bridge between the father and the younger son and avoid public humiliation. But instead of trying to restore the family's fellowship, the older son silently took his double portion of the fortune. There was neither outcry against the younger brother's action nor passionate defense of the father's honor. The older son pocketed his inheritance, stayed home, and stayed quiet. His silence was deafening.

Jesus was painting a picture of two types of lost people. The first is openly rebellious—the "in your face" sin of the younger son. The second is a more subtle type of sinner—seen in the older son. He represents someone who appears to be near God but is actually far away.



In what ways might our actions whisper to our God what the younger son shouted to his father?

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How do we profit from God's blessings without thought for the responsibilities that accompany them?

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Jesus' dramatic parable continues with the younger son converting his newly obtained property into cash. When the disgraceful deed was done, the prodigal son headed off to a far country, where he squandered all his wealth in reckless living. The boy wasted his money and life, so when the famine came, he wound up desperate. Jesus described him going and hiring himself out to one of the citizens of that country.

Jesus subtly let the Jewish audience know that the boy was now working for Gentiles, those who did not know the one true God. He said that the boy was sent into the fields to feed pigs. Not only did the younger son start working for a foreigner, he was actually *feeding pigs*—the most despised and unclean of animals for a Jew! The Jewish Talmud says, “Cursed be the man who breeds swine.” The Jews in Jesus' audience must have bristled at such a terrible picture of this younger son's sin and no doubt agreed with the son's assessment that he was no longer worthy to be a son.



### Voices from Church History

“Whoever departs from the Word of God hungers... Whoever leaves treasure lacks. Whoever departs from wisdom is stupefied. Whoever departs from virtue is destroyed. It was fitting that he begin to be in need, because he abandoned the treasures of wisdom and the knowledge of God.”<sup>1</sup>

—Ambrose (circa 339–397)



What are some common examples today of ways we might squander the good gifts of God?

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In what ways does the squandering of God's gifts lead to slavery instead of freedom?

## 2. Like the father, God celebrates when a sinner returns to Him (Luke 15:20-24).



*<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.'<sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was*

*dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.*

Through all the choices of the younger son, the father had not stopped loving his child. He hoped to see their relationship restored. He dreamed of them talking again, laughing, and spending time together. His eagerness to see his younger son again impelled him time after time to the front of the yard, where he stared into the distance to see if maybe his boy were on his way home.

Jesus said that when the father finally did see the son at the edge of the village, he pulled up his robes and *ran* to him. A man of stature never pranced around in public! But the father knew that if someone else were to meet the son first, they might beat him, send him away, or publicly humiliate him for shaming the family. The community had nothing but disgust for such a scoundrel.

Make a list of several characteristics communicated by the father's actions in this parable.	
How are these characteristics true of God?	How can they be true of us?

Next, the son spoke, and his planned speech now takes on new meaning. Stunned by his father's unconditional love, the son began to say his prepared words, but he left out the rest of his speech.

The son understood his unworthiness to be part of the family and receive such love. He recognized the weight and depth of his sin and the shame and agony that he put his father through. But now he was truly repentant! He no longer mentioned his plan to become a hired servant. He realized that the problem was never just about money, the inheritance, and all the squandered belongings. The true issue had always been the broken relationship, which had now been restored due to the father's outrageous display of love and acceptance. The father had accepted the boy back as a son, not a servant, not a scoundrel, and not as an infidel.

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 68. *Repentance*

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.

The father in Jesus' story did more than simply accept back his son. With probably the entire community watching the dramatic events, the father ordered that a robe, shoes, and a signet ring be brought out from the house. The father bore the shame when he ran down the street; the son went home dressed with honor.

This is the picture of salvation—God running toward humankind with arms outstretched, not only to embrace us but to take the nails reserved for our punishment.



In what ways does the father's treatment of his son go above and beyond what anyone expected?

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In what ways does God's treatment of us go beyond what we might hope for?

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### 3. Like the older son, some resent God's grace and cling to religious observance (Luke 15:25-32).

*<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> 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.' <sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"*

Jesus described how the older son had just found out that people were celebrating because his reprobate brother had returned home. But he deemed the party unworthy of his attendance. So the father went out to convince his puffed up and arrogant older son to come in and celebrate his brother's return.

The loving father had two sons who blocked his love in different ways. The younger one had walled himself off from the father's love by doing evil, while the older one walled himself off from that same love by doing good. The older brother went through the motions so he could gain rights in the household, not true membership in the family, but his attitude strayed far from the heart of the father he claimed to serve. And so, the younger brother, the repentant rebel, was inside feasting, while the older brother, "the good son," stayed outside pouting!



How can our "good deeds" be a way of walling ourselves off from a relationship with God?

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Are you more likely to see your Christian life as the drudgery of a servant or a feast for a son? Why?

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Jesus ended His parable with the gracious father's response to his older son's complaint. Dad had the last word! Although the older son had lashed out, refusing even to address his dad respectfully, the father replied by calling him "son," reminding him of their shared relationship. He earnestly wanted his son to come inside so that the family would be whole.

The father then turned the focus away from possessions, works, and obedience. The father desired the relationship: "You are always with me!" The issue was neither the faithfulness of the older son nor the reckless living of the younger one. Rather, the spotlight shone on the younger brother not because of anything he had done but because the father-son relationship had been restored.

The father's treatment of the older brother models God's graciousness. God has shared so much with humanity—His creation, His goodness, His common grace. He calls everyone everywhere to repentance. And when we do repent, He looks at us and says, "Son!" Will we accept Him as Father by confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior?



## Voices from Church History

"Our pleasure and our duty,  
Though opposite before,  
Since we have seen his  
beauty, Are joined to part  
no more."<sup>2</sup>

—John Newton (1725-1807)

 What are some ways that a closed-off heart to God will lead to a closed-off heart to sinners who find forgiveness?

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 How does the gospel challenge and transform closed-off hearts?

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## Conclusion

Jesus ended the parable as a cliffhanger, leaving the audience waiting for the story's resolution: Did the older brother go in and join the family celebration? The answer is left to the listener. You're invited to step up onto the stage and act out the parable's final scene. Will you enter the house of God and become a part of God's family? Or will you stay out in the field, appearing close to God while you are actually far from His heart? Will you remain out in the field, settled on working and doing without any thought as to having a true relationship with the Father? Won't you come in? Won't you become a part of the reason for celebration? The story's grand finale lies in your hands.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** The Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus for His practice of welcoming and dining with sinners. The stories He told in response to their criticism focused on God's joy over sinners coming to repentance. The God who seeks and saves the lost is Jesus, the Savior whose search-and-rescue mission is accomplished at great personal cost to Himself.

# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us not to resent His grace toward others but to celebrate the Father's goodness in welcoming any repentant sinner home.

1. How does the parable of the prodigal son encourage you to come to the Father for forgiveness when you have fallen into sin?

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2. How can we as a group/church celebrate with the Father when a sinner repents and turns to Jesus in faith?

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3. What steps can we take to eliminate needless barriers that would keep sinners from "coming home" to the Father?

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