

Learning a Lesson Luke 15:11-32 9-14-2025

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided it.

"... the younger son... set off for a distant country and squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine..., and he began to be in need. So he hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs..."

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'My father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will go back to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like a hired man...' But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

"But the father said, 'Quick! Bring the best robe.... Put on a ring and sandals. Bring the fattened calf. Let's... celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son heard music and asked what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry... So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed you. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

When I ask you about going to college, what's the first thing that comes to your mind? Getting a degree? Debt? Most likely, you thought, Good Times. Sadly, by that, most people mean things that contradict God's commandments, especially #s 2, 5 and 6. AKA cursing, drinking to excess/illicit substances and immorality. The young man in our reading today would have fit right in on a college campus. The majority of students follow the advice seen on sign at a Paris hotel: "Please leave your values at the front desk." And sometimes we're tempted to leave our values somewhere else, too.

In our hearts, all of us are prodigals (lost I call them) to one degree or another. And, we are the elder brother, so self-righteous that we cannot even admit our need for repentance. That's human nature. That's why this familiar story strikes home as it does. Note the background of the story.

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them . . ." Luke sets the scene. Tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to hear Jesus. As you know, tax collectors were universally despised

by the righteous and the unrighteous alike. They had close ties to the occupying Roman government and used despicable means of securing their income.

A rabbinic rule stated that one should not associate with ungodly people, so the rabbis avoided those who belonged to this class of sinners, which included tax collectors. Yet here was Jesus, teaching a group of tax-collectors/sinners as if they were as acceptable. This disgusted the Pharisees. This is the setting for today's lesson. Jesus tells a parable with this particular audience in mind.

This is a story that never grows old and has probably the sweetest storybook ending of any story in the Bible. This story tells us as much, if not more, about God than any other parable in the Bible. But it also tells us as much, if not more, about us.

A young man evidently had a good home, godly parents, everything you could ever want. But the root of ingratitude had grown into the fruit of rebellion. This boy is tired of sowing corn in the country. He wants to sow wild oats in the city.

"So the younger said to his father, 'Father, give me my inheritance.'" So the father did. Now normally the inheritance of an estate would not be given until the death of the father. But this son wanted his inheritance immediately. What he was really saying to his father was, "I want what you have but I don't want you. I don't want to wait till you die to get your money"

It reminds me of the story of the little boy who kept asking his grandfather to sound like a frog. The grandfather said, "Why do you want me to sound like a frog?" The little boy said, "I heard **Mom say that when you croak, we're all going to be rich.**"

So many people in this world are just like this son. They want everything God has to give. They want to breathe God's air, to eat God's food, to walk on God's earth, to enjoy God's world. But they don't want God.

But notice that when the son asked his father for the share of the inheritance, the father gave it to him. Now the father was under no obligation to do this. In fact, most Palestinian fathers of that day would have done what my Dad would have done, and kicked his boy out into the street. But the Father gives the lost son his inheritance.

Look what happened. ***"And not many days after, the younger son journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with wild living."*** The boy hit the trail looking for wine, women, and song.

Nobody asked him to leave, nobody forced him to leave, nobody wanted him to leave; he had no reason to leave; he left on his own. It was his fault that he got away from his father. But that tells me something wonderful about God. As much as God loves us, He will never force anyone to obey Him. He will never coerce anyone to love him or worship Him. He gives each of us free will. If you're determined to learn the lessons of life the hard way, that is exactly the way God will teach you.

God lowers the crossing bar; flashes the lights; sounds the alarm, but He will not keep you from crossing the tracks. If you want to get away from God, you can. But remember, it'll be your fault. If you're separated from God, God is not the one that moved. James 4:8 says, ***"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."***

Some of you may be thinking, 'Don't make it sound like he was having such a good time.' Well, the fact is, he was having a good time. I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that there are no pleasures in sin. Listen, if there wasn't any fun in sin, nobody would sin. The devil never goes fishing without attractive bait.

But what this boy didn't realize was that the pleasures of sin will always turn into the poison of sorrow. He went up like a rocket and came down like a rock; v. 13 says, "**he wasted his possessions with wild living.**" This young man wanted to live high on the hog, but he wound up living lower than the dogs. Listen to what happened. "**When he had spent all, a severe famine arose, and he began to be in want. Then he went and hired himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.**"

This boy had fallen so far he would have needed a ladder just to reach bottom. These verses tell us that his 'F's were gone: fortune, gone; food, gone; fun, gone; friends, gone; and worst of all, his Faith was gone. You talk about getting low: the worst employer for a Jew was a Gentile, and the most dishonorable animals Jews could work with were unclean pigs. So here was a young Jewish adult who had everything in life he could have wanted, now working for a Gentile slopping hogs.

Where were his friends that he had partied with? Well, they had all deserted him. These are people who are right by your side as long as the food and the booze and the drugs are flowing. But when the money runs out, so do they. I heard about a lost son who left home, became destitute, so he sent his dad this telegram: Dear Dad, I'm in the big city, flat broke, miles from home and no friends. What should I do? The father wired back: "Make new friends."

Well, the only friends this boy had now were swine. I know the son didn't have this in mind when he walked out the door of his father's house. But he learned a hard lesson that every 'strayer' learns. **Sin will take you farther than you want to go; sin will keep you longer than you want to stay; and sin will cost you more than you want to pay.**

V. 17 makes an interesting observation. "**But when he came to himself, he said, 'My father's hired servants have bread enough to spare, and I'm dying of hunger.'**" We would say today "he came to his senses." How foolish to choose sin over salvation; hell over heaven; judgment over Jesus; eternal death over eternal life?

First in desperation, then in repentance, he says: "**I'll go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired servants.'**" So v. 20 simply says, "**And he arose and went to his father.**" Now notice carefully. He came just as he was. That is exactly the way God wants you to come; that's the only way you can come.

Now we reach the climax of this incredible story: "**But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and kissed him.**" Even though the son had forgotten the father, the father had never forgotten the son.

You go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and you find the first time man tried to run away from God. You know what you never find in the Bible? You never find God running away from man. **God never runs from you. He always run to you.**

Now **don't miss this picture.** The son, shoulders stooped, head down, shuffles slowly to his father. But **Dad runs to his son. In Hebrew culture it was considered**

undignified for an older man to run. People wore long flowing robes in those days, and they would have to gather them up around their waist to run. It was embarrassing. But this man didn't care. All he cared about was his son.

The son tried to confess. "***Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.***" The boy was also going to add that he was willing to work as a hired servant. But he can't even get those words out. Because the father is so busy with compassion he doesn't have time for confession. Doesn't it amaze you that the father never brought up the past? The sins of the son had been buried in the grave of forgiveness and cast into the sea of forgetfulness. Because **when you come back to God, all you find is forgiveness.**

Notice what happens next. "***The father said, 'Bring out the best robe and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf, and let's be merry.'***" He gives his son his version of 'F's; his favor; his fellowship; his forgiveness; and a future.

Out in the far country the son had learned the meaning of misery, but back home he now learned the meaning of mercy. You may be a prodigal sitting in this service, or listening on-line, or hearing this on a tape. If so, let me tell you three lessons never to forget that Jesus wants you to know from this story:

No matter how far away you've gone, you can come back.

No matter how far out you've gone, you can come in.

No matter how far down you've gone, you can come up.

Think about a father giving up his child for people who choose to rebel against him. What a tremendous sacrifice and cost! Jesus' death took the place of the punishment that we deserved. When we receive this gift, He no longer sees us as guilty. Rather, He justifies us, makes us righteous, and changes our ultimate destiny: instead of facing everlasting separation from Him, we will enjoy His presence eternally. What's more, almighty God adopts us as His children forever. Our heavenly Father guides, protects, and counsels us as we walk through life—and promises us that we are secure in Him throughout eternity.

Was the older brother's reaction what you expected? Probably not. He is like church members who feel some people don't belong in church cuz of their previous lifestyles. God forgives and so must we. Occasionally, I have people tell me they're afraid that people will look at them funny if they come back. I usually respond, 'Can you show me what a funny look is? I think they'll be happy you're here!'

Do you know what people most look for in a church? Far and away, a friendly church. Do we greet guests, try to make them feel like they belong? Only you can answer that.

So, how do you think the story ultimately turns out? Do you think the boy became a better person after his father welcomed him home? Did the older brother have a change of heart? Jesus doesn't tell us. He leaves it up to us to write our own ending. What will be yours?

