

The Narrow Door

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[0:00] Amen. The gospel story in Luke 15 that Hillary just read is one of the most famous stories in the whole Bible. And it's one of the most famous stories in all of literature. It inspired multiple! It inspired multiple famous paintings, including the one on your bulletin. It inspired another famous painting made by Rembrandt in the 1600s that you may have also seen. And over the centuries, many people have called this story or called the painting the story of the prodigal son or the story of the lost son. And that's only half right. We should really call this story that Jesus tells the story of the two sons. When Jesus tells this story, He wants us really to compare and contrast the journeys of both sons. For context, in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 15, Jesus is speaking to a mixed audience of tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes. The scribes and the Pharisees in verses 1 and 2, the pastors and theologians of the day, are criticizing Jesus. And what is their critique?

Their critique is, verse 2, this man receives sinners and hangs out with them. The good people of that day are criticizing Jesus for hanging out with the bad people. And in response to this critique, this challenge, Jesus then proceeds to tell three stories in Luke 15 about lostness, about lostness.

In verses 3 through 7, He tells the story of a man, the lost sheep. Verses 8 through 10, tells the story of a woman with a lost coin. And then in our section, verses 11 through 32, He tells the story about a father who has two sons who were both lost. And so we're going to look at the story of the two sons. We're going to look at the story of the journey of the younger brother, the journey of the older brother, and how the father responds to both. Before we begin, I want to say that I've benefited so much on this particular story from the preaching and teaching of the late Dr. Tim Keller, who's a pastor in New York City. And although I may not quote him directly, I just want to give credit where credit is due, because so much of how I think about the story is because of him. And so I just wanted to acknowledge that before we begin. So first of all, let's look at where the story starts, the journey of the younger brother, the journey of the younger brother.

The story begins with the younger son demanding that his father give him his share of the property. And what you need to understand is that this would have been incredibly shocking and offensive to Jesus' audience, because what is the younger son doing? He's asking for his share of the inheritance. And this is something that's shocking both in both ancient and modern cultures, because an inheritance is something that's passed on when one or more parents die. And so he's basically telling his father, you're as good as dead to me. I care more about your stuff. I care more about your money than the fact that you exist. Give me my inheritance. But perhaps what may have been even more surprising or even shocking is how the father responds. Jesus' audience probably would have expected in this situation that the father would have responded with stern discipline, perhaps even physical discipline. How dare you speak to your father like this? How dare you? This would have brought great shame on the father. It would have been brought great shame on the family in the eyes of the whole community if a son would have done this. But the father doesn't respond with stern discipline.

How does he respond? He says, okay, here you go. And so the son cashes in his inheritance and he leaves home. And the son journeys far away, younger son journeys far away and spends his money on reckless living. He heads to New York City and spends time at the best nightclubs, stays in the best hotels, eats at the best restaurants. And then he goes to Vegas and he spends his money on gambling and casinos and all the things you can spend your money on. Then he goes to Coachella and he goes to the best concerts.

[4:39] He's buying everyone drinks. He's having a great time. And then he goes to Tijuana. He's partying on the beaches in Tijuana and buying everybody drinks. For a while, he has a great time. He has an amazing time. He's the life of the party. Everybody wants to hang out with him. He's having a lot of fun.

But then one day he wakes up in a hotel room and he can't remember how he got there. He's hung over. He checks the bank account app on his phone and he realizes there's nothing left.

But not only that, a famine has come to the land. The partying is over. He's run out of money. His friends are gone and he's hungry. And so he goes what any hungry person does and he goes and tries to find someone who can at least at bare minimum let him work for food. He finds a pig farmer who sends him into his fields to feed the pigs. And as he's feeding the pig slop to the pigs, his stomach begins to growl. And he's so hungry that even the pig slop starts to look appetizing to him. And for a first century Jew, what you need to understand is that this would have been the lowest of the low. This would have been rock bottom. Not only has this son brought shame on his family and his community, not only has he rejected God and his commandments, but he's with pigs.

Pigs were unclean animals, according to the Old Testament. Touching a pig's carcass or eating its meat made you ceremonially unclean, unable to worship with the gathered people of God.

He is at the bottom of the social and moral and religious ladder. He is at rock bottom. But in the place of rock bottom, the youngest son has the clearest thought he's had in a long time.

[6:34] Verse 17. But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread? But here I perish with hunger. If I go back, it probably won't be like it was before I left home, but it'll be better than this. And so he comes up with a plan to return home. And he also prepares an honest confession. His honest confession is, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your servants.

But notice how in this confession, there is truth, but there is also shame. The voice of shame. I am no longer worthy. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

So he starts to head home. Doesn't have any monies. He can't get by a plane ticket. He can't drive. So he walks. He hitchhikes. And finally, he gets to the road where his father's house is.

And he sees his father's house in the distance. And you can just imagine him rehearsing his speech to the father. You can just imagine him walking down the road, rehearsing his speech. His head is low towards the ground. He can barely look up. He's full of shame.

And he is ready to receive the father's stern discipline the moment that he walks through the door. And he knows he deserves it. But then out of the corner of his eye, he looks up and he sees something in the distance.

[8:14] And what does he see? He sees his father running towards him. Running towards him.

What you need to understand is that in ancient Middle Eastern cultures, fathers didn't run. Children ran. Mothers ran after children.

But fathers, it was beneath them. It went against their dignity as a man. It would have made this father look foolish to run out in public after his son.

But in verse 20, what we see is, we see one of the most beautiful, powerful lines in the whole Bible. And it says that while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion.

In breaking all social convention, risking his dignity, looking foolish, the father runs. He runs towards his son.

[9:19] And he embraces him and hugs him and kisses him and wraps his arms around him. The son isn't even able to get his whole speech out before the father asks his servants to bring a robe and put it around him and put a ring on his finger and sandals under his feet.

The son is overwhelmed by the father's joy and love. And a party breaks out. Verse 23, he tells his servants, bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. It's a powerful story.

And the journey of the younger brother in many ways shows us what the heart of the Christian faith is really all about. It's about a father. It's about a loving father who pursues us and who runs after us before we could ever reach him.

A father who pursues us and meets us in our sin and shame. And in that place envelops us with love and compassion and joy.

[10:38] Friend, maybe you're here this morning and you find yourself resonating with the journey of the younger brother. Maybe it's because you haven't been to church in a long time.

Maybe you've never been to church in your life. Maybe you're not a Christian. Maybe you don't even know if you believe in God or not. Maybe you're not even 100% sure why you're here or how you got here, but somehow you made it here this morning.

Might I suggest, if that's you, that the reason why you're here this morning is because you have a heavenly father who is running after you.

Maybe you've been running from him for a long time, but he is pursuing your heart. Maybe you're here because deep down you may not have been able to articulate it, but deep down you share the ache of the younger brother.

This life that you've pursued, maybe it looked attractive, maybe it was fun for a while, but it's left you in a place where you feel unsatisfied, you feel hungry.

[11:54] And may I suggest that that hunger that you feel is a hunger and a longing for divine love. This story shows us the heart of the Christian faith that what stands in the way of our experience of God's love is not his willingness to forgive, but our willingness to repent.

Our willingness to repent. Repentance means doing exactly what the younger son does in this story. It's turning away from the life that we've tried to live apart from the father and turning away towards the father's love.

That's repentance. The younger brother is, though he starts out probably not being a model example, he is a beautiful model of repentance.

We don't have to even have it all figured out or say the right words, but we just make a choice to turn away from the pig slop and to turn back towards the father's love.

And the moment that we do, we look out into the distance and we see that our father has already been running after us.

[13:16] Maybe you've, perhaps, whether you're a Christian or not, maybe you've always struggled with the idea of God as a father. Because if you're honest, your earthly father was less than great.

The story shows us that our heavenly father is different from our earthly fathers. He breaks all of the social conventions. He doesn't just forgive our sins, but he heals us in our places of shame and woundedness.

The younger son says, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. That's true. And that's true for all of us.

You know what's not true? I am no longer worthy to be called your son. That's the voice of shame. And it's a lie.

And maybe this voice sounds familiar to you. Maybe you're here this morning and you know that you don't just need the forgiveness of your father.

[14:21] You need healing from your father. In the places of your heart where there is shame, in the places in your heart where there's wounding. The good news is that in our deep places of shame and woundedness, your heavenly father sees you.

And he is filled with compassion. He runs towards you. He envelops you.

He puts a robe around you. He puts a ring on your finger and sandals on your feet. And he says, you are not just a servant. You are my beloved son.

You are my beloved daughter. The voice of shame has no presence here. He embraces you and celebrates you and throws a big party because he loves you.

This is the God we worship. This is your heavenly father. This is who he is. And the invitation of the journey of the younger brother this morning is this.

[15:26] The invitation is to turn away from the pig slop. Turn away from a life of self-indulgence.

Turn away from ways you've tried to heal yourself. Turn away from ways you've tried to self-medicate with things that can't actually heal you and turn towards the father's love because he is already running after you.

That's the invitation of the journey of the younger brother. Now let's look at the journey of the older brother. The journey of the older brother. In verse 25, we learn that as this party's happening, the older brother's in the field.

He's hard at work. He's sweating out in the fields. Suddenly he hears music and dancing. And so he calls one of the servants, asks what all the noise is about.

Servant says, your father's throwing a party for your younger brother because he's returned home safe and sound and we're all happy and celebrating. And the older brother completely stops what he's doing, stops him in his tracks.

[16:44] At first he's shocked. He can't believe what he's hearing. But then a rage starts to build within him and he refuses to go into the house.

He stays outside working more furiously than he was before, sweat dripping from his face. He can't believe it. He's so angry. And eventually the father comes out and begs him to come inside and says, come celebrate with us.

Your brother is home. Come in and join the party. Come join the feast. But he says to his father, I can't believe you. I've worked for you my whole life.

I've only ever done what you've asked me to do. You've never even given me a goat to celebrate with my friends. But this son who disobeyed God, who disobeyed you, who brought great shame to our family in the eyes of the community, who squandered your wealth, this son comes home.

You throw a party for him? Why is the elder brother so angry? Why isn't he glad that his brother has returned?

[17:53] Why is the elder brother so angry? Why is the elder brother so angry? Well, you need to understand part of how an inheritance works. Throwing a big party, killing the fattened calf, where did all of the cost of this party come from?

Where is it coming from? Well, now that the younger son has completely squandered his share of the inheritance, everything the father now owns is the older brother's inheritance. And so he's telling his father, you're wasting my stuff.

You're wasting my inheritance on him. And now we see. Now we see why the older brother is so angry.

Because deep down, he doesn't truly want the father. He wants the father's stuff. He sees his obedience to the father as leverage for what he really wants.

How does the father respond? To the older brother, well, like with the younger son, he could have responded with stern discipline in this moment. But just like with the younger son, the father responds with deep compassion.

[19:04] Verse 31, my son, the father says, you are always with me. And everything I have is yours. And I love you. But we had to celebrate and glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

And he was lost and is found. What does the older son do? Does he stay out in the field?

Does he come in and celebrate? Is he reconciled to his brother and his father? We don't know. We don't know. Jesus ends the story there.

He ends the story without resolution. Why would he do that? Why would Jesus end the story without an ending? Because Jesus is a master storyteller.

And because he wants his audience to see themselves in the story. Jesus wants the religious leaders, the pastors and theologians who were criticizing him and saying this man eats with sinners and hangs out with them.

[20:10] He wants them to see that they are the older brother in this story. And they have to make a choice. Will they stay out in the fields in their anger?

Or will they come in and celebrate? The main point, one of the main points of Jesus' whole story is this, is that both sons are lost.

And that we can be lost too. We can be lost as well as both a younger brother and as an older brother. A life of self-indulgence and a life of self-righteousness both alienate us from the father's love.

If we're honest, some of us in this room are more younger brother-ish. Some are more older brother-ish.

Many of us are probably a combination of the two. Younger brothers tend to break the rules. Older brothers tend to keep the rules. Younger brothers tend to be anti-authority and social norms.

[21:14] Older brothers tend to follow authority and social norms. Younger brothers tend to run away from religion. Older brothers tend to run towards religion. But both sons, both sons are using the father to get what they are really after, to get what they truly want.

The younger brother disobeys to get what he truly wants. But the older brother tries to leverage his obedience to get what he truly wants. Both are lost. Both are alienated from the father's love.

The younger brother rejects the father's love and his badness, but the older brother rejects the father's love and his goodness. And yet, what does the father do? He goes out to them both.

He pursues them both. He goes out to the younger son on the road and he goes out to the older son in the field. And what's true for younger brothers is true for older brothers as well.

That what stands in the way of us experiencing God's love is not his willingness to forgive. It's our willingness to repent.

[22:22] To grow in our life with God, we need not only to repent of our sin and self-indulgence, we also need to repent of our self-righteousness. We need to repent not only of what we've done wrong, but of doing right for the wrong reasons.

We need to repent of our motivations. It's fairly straightforward to figure out if you're acting like a younger brother. How do you know if you're acting like an older brother?

It's far more subtle. Because the older brother appears as if he's doing everything right. How do you know you're acting like an older brother? Here's how you know. When things don't go your way, when you don't get what you want, when life doesn't work out as you hope, you grow judgmental towards others and you grow angry towards God.

The older brother believes that because he's obeyed, the father owes him. And deep down, he sees his obedience as leverage to get what he truly wants. And when that doesn't happen, when life doesn't work out for him, when things don't go according to his plan, he's incredibly judgmental towards his younger brother and he's incredibly angry at his father.

How do you respond? When life doesn't work out. How do you respond when things don't go according to your plan? How do you respond when life doesn't work out for you?

[24:04] When I was in college, I was in a dating relationship with someone who I thought I was gonna marry. And when she broke up with me, I was completely devastated. I was completely devastated.

But I wasn't just heartbroken, I was angry. I was angry with God. Why? Because I functionally thought, on a functional level, I thought that if I obeyed God and did all the right things, that he was gonna make life work out for me.

But life hadn't worked out the way I thought and so I was angry. I was angry towards God. There was part of me deep down, there was part of my heart that saw my obedience as leverage to get God's stuff.

Not as a way to experience his love, not as a way to experience communion with the Father, but as a way to get his stuff. And so I needed to repent of that. If you wanna grow as a Christian, if you wanna have a deep experience of God's love, you need to repent, not just of the sins of the younger brother, but also the sins of the older brother.

not just from self-indulgence, but from self-righteousness. Not only of what you've done wrong, but of your motivations for doing right.

[25:17] Why should we obey God? Why does the Bible say about why should we obey God? The Bible only has one answer. It's love.

It's love. To experience loving communion with the Father, not to get his stuff, but to get him.

To get him. To experience loving communion with him. That is the right motivation to obey our Father. And if we wanna obey our Father out of love, not only do we need to repent, but we also need to see that the Father's love isn't free.

It's not free. The Father's love wasn't free for the younger brother. Father's love isn't free for the older brother. It's not free for us.

It came at a great cost. It comes at a great cost. Jesus' audience, first century Middle Eastern audience, would have known that in that culture, older brothers had certain obligations.

[26:28] One of those obligations was to help and even rescue younger brothers in need. To go out and search for them if they were lost, no matter the cost.

To even pay their debt if they were in debt or in jail. But the older brother doesn't do this. He doesn't live up to those social and cultural obligations. Why does Jesus give us such a poor picture of an elder brother?

To show us, or to show his audience, to show the Pharisees and scribes, this is how they were acting. This was them. They were the elder brother. And to show us that this is how we can act sometimes.

But what would a true older brother have done? A true older brother would have seen the agony and the heartbreak of his father.

The agony and heartbreak of his father who had a son who was lost. And he would have left home to go looking for him. And he would have gone to whatever lengths.

[27:40] He would have gone to whatever cost to find him. And when he found him, he would have rescued him. He would have paid his debts. And he would have brought him home to the father at great cost, at whatever cost to himself.

That's what a true elder brother would have done. The younger brother in this story doesn't have an older brother like that.

But we do. We do. Jesus Christ is our true older brother who left his father to rescue us at great cost to himself.

Who didn't just leave home, but who left heaven to find us. Who didn't just open his wallet, but on the cross to open his body to pay our debt.

Who spent his inheritance on us and who covered us with his robe and his ring and his sandals. Who covered us with his righteousness so that we could be called sons of God, daughters of God, and co-heirs, co-heirs with Christ.

[28:52] Don't you see that we have access to the extravagant love of the father, but it's not free. It came at a great cost.

It came at the cost of our older brother, Jesus Christ, who suffered and died to bring us home. And because of him, because of him, what the father says to the older brother, he says to us, everything I have is yours and you are always with me.

And so whether we are more, whether we find ourselves this morning, we tend more younger brother-ish or whether we tend more older brother-ish or maybe we're a combination of the two, we need to see that we know that we can always repent and turn back to the love of the father.

We can always repent and turn back to the love of the father because we are clothed in the righteousness of the son. He puts his robe on our shoulders.

He puts his ring on our finger. He puts his sandals on our feet and he will share his inheritance with us for all of eternity. Let's pray.

[30:11] Our father in heaven, we thank you for this beautiful, powerful story. We thank you for how it shows us how vast and wide and extravagant your love and your compassion is for us.

Thank you that, thank you for Jesus, our true elder brother who came to rescue us and find us at great cost to himself. Lord, help us to turn back to you, to turn back to your love.

We pray this in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit. Amen.