

# The heart of the Father

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Date: 15 June 2025

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, I don't know whether you celebrate Father's Day or not. For some it is a lovely day to celebrate their dad and to reflect back on childhood and so on.

! Maybe remember big hugs that you got as a kid. For some it's not an easy day. Maybe you have said goodbye to your dad. My dad passed away back in 2013 and for others it is a hard day because maybe your dad wasn't who you would have liked him to be.

And if you are a dad it can be mixed feelings as well because there's great joy. We want to love our kids well and yet we're very conscious of our own failings as a father.

It's interesting that as Jesus tells this story about two sons, as the story unfolds you realise it's actually more about the father than the sons.

Now the sons are in the story, the sons are important parts of the story, but actually the one who really shines is the father. The one who really shines and comes to the fore in the story.

[ 1 : 1 6 ] The one who you really want to know is the father. And so Jesus wants us to hear this story so that we might know what God is like.

And so if he is your father, if you know him as your father, that you can hear this and reflect on it as being true of you.

And if you don't know him as your father, that this can be true of you. And so let's listen in, let's look in to this story that Jesus tells. And we do begin with the sons. Let's have a look at where the younger son is in verse 13.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all that he had, set off for a distant country. So this place that the son goes to is far away.

It is a distant country, far away from the father. And in those days, a distant country was a distant country. Far away actually meant far away with no WhatsApp or FaceTime or email or no real postal service to mention.

[ 2 : 3 0 ] Distant countries were really distant. But as Jesus sets the scene here with his son being far away geographically, you realize that not only is he far away geographically.

In verse 12, the younger son says to the father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between the two sons.

And so the son comes to the father and asks for his inheritance from the father. And as Tim Keller has pointed out, essentially what he is saying is that he is wanting the father to be gone out of his life.

It would have been normal for the inheritance to come to the son when the father had passed away, not while the father was still alive. And so we realize that not only was the son far away from the father geographically, he was far away from the father in terms of their relationship.

And you see that he lives in a way that is far away from what the father would have wanted. In verse 13, he squandered his wealth in wild living or reckless living.

[ 3 : 48 ] And the older son down in verse 30 fills in some of the details for us in terms of what this reckless living looked like. The older son says to the father, when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes.

So you realize that this younger son is far away. He is far away in a distant country. He is far away in terms of his relationship to the father.

He is far away in terms of how he is living. Far from what the father would have wanted. And yet there is an irony here. Because even though he is far away from the father in all those ways, he is still dependent on the father.

You see Jesus repeating a word in these verses. He says to the father, give me my share of the estate. The son says to the father, give me my share of the estate in verse 12.

And so the father divided his property between them. And we don't get it as much in the translation. But in verse 13, this word property is the same word that's used where it says that the son squandered his wealth in wild living.

[ 5 : 05 ] He squandered his property in wild living. And it's the same word that the older son picks up on in verse 30. This son of yours has squandered your property.

And what you realize is that even though in one sense the property is the son's, actually it is the father's, really. It is actually the father's kindness in giving this to him that is allowing him, that is enabling him even, to live in the way that he is living in this far country.

And so in a sense, even though he is far away from the father, he is still living on the kindness and gift of the father.

But you realize, we realize that he's been trying to separate out the kindness of the father from the father. He wants the kindness, he wants the gifts, without wanting the father.

And the result of that is found in verses 14 to 16. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

[ 6 : 18 ] He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. And so what the son is starting to realize is that what seems to work for a while, living on the kindness of the father, but not wanting the father, the father actually, sooner or later, shows itself for what it is.

It's a disaster. It's not a great idea. Sooner or later, the son has realized what happens by trying to separate out the gifts that the father has given from the father himself.

And so he has this hunger in the pit of his stomach. And you can imagine him with the pigs, the smell and the sights and the stink of the place.

He is at a point now where he will try anything to satisfy himself. He longs to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating in verse 16, but no one gave him anything.

And so this son is on his way to death, having left the father, having separated out the good, kind gifts of the father from the father.

[ 7 : 43 ] But in this story, death is not the end, because in verse 17, he comes to his senses. Or you could translate it literally as he came to himself, which is where we get that phrase from.

What does it look like that he came to himself? Well, he realizes he needs what the father gives. In verse 17, he says, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare?

And here I am starving to death. He realizes that he needs what the father gives. He is a hired servant in this faraway country, but he's starving.

And nobody gives him anything. And yet to be a hired servant with the father, this one who is kind and generous.

They have more than enough. They have food to spare. The father's house is like one of those houses that you go into, and you've finished your dinner, and you look away for a moment, and then you look back, and they've filled your plate again, and you're saying, I have enough.

[ 8 : 52 ] And then you struggle your way through a second plate of food, and they fill it again. The son is realizing, the hired servants of my father has more than enough.

And imagine, he was a son. If this is how the servants are treated, imagine how the sons are treated. And so the son, as he comes to himself, he realizes he needs what the father gives, but he actually also realizes that he needs the father.

In verse 18, I will set out and go back to my father. He realizes that he needs the father. Not only is he hungry physically, he is hungry, starved for this relationship with the father.

And so he comes to himself by realizing these things, but he also comes to himself by realizing his sin. His sin. In verse 18, he says, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

He acknowledges the wrong that he has done. What seemed like a good idea at the time, what seemed like a great way to live, a great way to satisfy his hunger, actually he has been deceived.

[ 10 : 14 ] This reckless life is no life at all. This pursuit of pleasure as an end in itself is actually a road to death.

And so he realizes his sin, and he realizes he is not worthy. He says in verse 19, I am no longer worthy to be called your son because of how I've behaved.

He realizes he needs the father's kindness and mercy when he says, make me like one of your hired servants. He just wants to go in that entry level into the father's house.

He realizes that life in the father's house, even as a hired servant, is better than life far away from the father. And once he comes to himself, he comes to his father.

In verse 20, it says, he got up and went to his father. And it's essentially the same phrase that Jesus uses, that once he comes to himself, he comes to his father.

[ 11 : 23 ] And so this one who had been far away, not just geographically, but in terms of his relationship with the father, in terms of how he had been living, comes to himself and comes to the father.

And the reason Jesus is telling this story is because people who are listening needed to hear this. It wasn't just a nice story that Jesus was telling about a man returning to his dad that makes you feel all warm and cuddly on Father's Day.

It is a story that describes what many of those who were listening to Jesus had experienced themselves or needed to experience. Because the picture that Jesus is painting here is the picture that is so familiar to so many of us, where we can reflect back on our lives and see where we were far from God the Father.

Far from a relationship with him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him.

Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him.

[ 12 : 36 ] Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Far from living for him.

Far from living for him. Far from living for him. Dr. Jim Carrey, as you've heard me quoting before, what does he say about being rich and famous? He says, I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see that it's not the answer.

He's had it all, and he says it's not the answer. And you know, this is what many of us here have realized this morning, that life away from the Father is no life at all.

Luke, who will be sharing his testimony later, he had this great line in his story. He says, life with God is so much better than life without him.

And that is so true. That is what Luke has realized. That is what many of you here have realized. And that is what the Son in Jesus' story has realized.

[ 13 : 44 ] If you're here this morning and you haven't realized this, this is what Jesus wants you to hear, that to live far away from God is no life at all.

It cannot satisfy. It will leave you hungry. It will leave you dissatisfied. It will leave you starved for what your soul was made for.

And so that's what Jesus wants us to hear, that life away from God is no life at all. And so this Son who comes to himself and comes to the Father returns, and you're wondering, how is the Father going to respond?

Well, we see the Father's response in verse 20. While he was 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. If you read people who know the culture of the day that Jesus was speaking in, they will highlight for you how unusual it would have been for a grown man who had grown children like this man to lift up the bottoms of his garment, to run in public.

[ 14 : 59 ] It would have been highly unusual. It would have brought shame on him. It would have been a dishonor to him. That's what they'll tell you about that culture. And of course, when you reflect on it, you think, well, it's not too different in our culture.

I mean, you'll see somebody running occasionally down St. Patrick Street, or you'll see them running on McCurtin Street, and you'll think, why are they running? And you're hoping that they have a good reason to be running, because otherwise it's just embarrassing.

They might be doing the marathon. They might be running for a bus. But somebody running down the street always gets our attention, because we want to think, why are they running? Why are they embarrassing themselves like this?

You just don't do this in public unless you have a good reason to do it. I'm not sure I've ever seen a grown father running towards his grown son in public.

And I love our boys, but I don't think I've ever done this. I'll run at them on the soccer pitch, but I don't know if I've ever run towards them in the way that Jesus describes this father running.

[ 16 : 09 ] And I'd love to be able to do this. I'd love to be so unselfconscious and free of embarrassment that I could do this. And do you know what would happen in the story as Jesus tells it?

If anybody is watching in this story, they're thinking, I hope this father has a good reason to run. And then they see him embracing his son in this big bear hug and giving him this big bearded kiss on the side of the cheek.

And immediately, many of them, their hearts will be melted by this love and compassion that the father has for this son.

Maybe some who would have known the family a little bit more closely would have thought, doesn't he realize what this son has done? Doesn't he realize the shame and the dishonor that this son has brought on the family?

On the father? Of course, the father realizes. In verse 21, the son tells him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

[ 17 : 23 ] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. The younger son tells the father what he has done. And the older son tells the father what the younger son has done.

In verse 30, he says, he has squandered your property with prostitutes. And of course, in a small town culture, you'll know that some of the stories will have trickled through from that far country.

People journeying between the places. The stories will have come home. How else would the older son have known? And when the older son says to the father, he's not saying it as though this is news to the father.

The father knows this well and the father's fears will only have been confirmed as he sees the son walking down the road towards him.

He left in good health with the father's money in his money bag, well dressed, and now he's coming back with nothing in his hands, looking starved.

[ 18 : 25 ] The father would have known immediately, having seen the son, that he had squandered it all, that he had lost it all.

And you wouldn't blame the father for saying to the son, yes, you will work as a hired servant. You will pay off the money that you squandered in the reckless living that you enjoyed.

And then when you have paid off every penny, we can talk about whether you are worthy to be welcomed back into this family. You could imagine the father saying that. But that isn't what the father does.

In verse 22, the father says to his servants, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

And so the father covers the shame of the son. He clothes him in the best robe and puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet so that if you looked at him in that moment, you would think, here is a son of honor.

[ 19 : 36 ] Here is a son who is loved. Here is a son who has lived in a way that has brought respect to the family. And the father honors the son though he doesn't deserve it.

He says, you're not a hired servant. You're my son. And the way in which the father does this is because the father bears the cost of what the son has done.

It should be the son coming back to the father, having invested the property well with more in the bank. I'm going to throw you a party, father. But he doesn't. The father says in verse 23, bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Let's have a feast and celebrate. The father is the one who bears the cost as this calf is killed for this son who has sinned. And amazingly, though the father bears the cost, he doesn't draw attention to that.

The emphasis of the story lands on the celebration of the father. Verse 24, the son of mine was dead and is alive again.

[ 20 : 54 ] He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. And the reason they celebrate is because at the end of verse 23, the father has said, let's have a feast and celebrate.

He's celebrating because the son is dead and is alive. And as we baptize Luke and Gift and Matthew later on, that is the picture that we are given by Jesus as we plunge them under the water of somebody who has died to this old life, this reckless life, this life away from the father.

They have died with Christ and they are alive again. And God, the father, the father in the story says this is a cause for celebration.

This is a cause for rejoicing. It's interesting, if you're familiar with Luke chapter 15, you'll know this is the third parable that Jesus tells about things that were lost.

And at the end of the first parable, Jesus says, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who do not need to repent.

[ 22 : 04 ] And you're thinking, wow, that's amazing. There'll be rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents. And that is amazing enough in and of itself that there'll be rejoicing in heaven as a place.

But then at the end of the second parable, Jesus says in the same way in verse 10, I tell you there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God. And it's as if Jesus has honed in a little bit closer in saying that there will be rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God.

And you're wondering, is he going to keep going with this? So that by the end of the third parable, we realize that as Jesus tells us, the Father is rejoicing, the Father is celebrating, that actually, it is God himself this morning who celebrates over Matthew and Gift and Luke that they are his.

And he celebrates over each of us here who know him as our Father. And we would hardly believe it but for the fact that Jesus tells us it is so.

So it's this story that Jesus tells and there's beauty to it and there's depth to it and yet the story isn't as beautiful and deep as the reality.

[ 23 : 34 ] However we feel about our earthly fathers, however we feel about being a dad if you're a dad, this is how Jesus describes God the Father to us.

Full of compassion, covers our sins, covers our shame at great cost to himself. God the Father has given more than a robe or a ring or a fattened calf.

God the Father has given Jesus himself to die in the place of the sinner so that we might be welcomed into the presence of God. That all who like this younger son confess their sin and their unworthiness who come to themselves and come to the Father are received freely, are celebrated by God.

As I've said it's lovely to hear the stories of those who are going to be baptized and Matthew is kind enough to share some of his story with me and it's interesting as you hear Matthew's story that his mother and Manu and Rao and Hannah all in a sense reflected the father to Matthew.

Listen to what Matthew says. Growing up with a Christian mother I knew about God from an early age but I remained skeptical throughout my teenage years and into my early 20s until I met Manu.

[ 25 : 03 ] Manuela as we spoke she shared the gospel and the word of God with me answering all the questions I had with grace and humility. She introduced me to her friends Hannah and Rao some of the most inspiring Christians I have met and a true example of showing their faith through their deeds.

And as you hear that you can hear the father running towards Matthew can't you? Matthew goes on to say God sent Manu who I didn't know I needed the love of my life to me probably the only person with the commitment to fight with me for a year adamantly defending explaining Christianity to me.

You can hear echoes of the father's pursuit in how Manu and others pursued Matthew in love. As Gift shared her story you hear about how the father bears the cost in order for this son to be welcomed in in order for Gift to be welcomed in in order for any of us to be welcomed in to the father's house this is what Gift says Jesus Christ the son of God who came to die for our sin and redeemed us into eternal life the cross is this crucifixion where the atonement of sins which Jesus Christ has accomplished has been paid for us this is why as Gift shares her story she says that she gave her life to God while she was in college because she recognized that God had given his son for her and so we get echoes of this love of the father this sacrifice of the father in the stories of those who have come to know the father and this is what

Jesus wants us to hear this morning this is what Jesus wants each of us to know for ourselves this morning he goes on to speak about the second son the older son who waits outside the party the one who has tried to get to the father on his own terms and yet is distant from the father who thinks about the father as a harsh master and the father is surprised by this you've always been with me all I have is yours and the invitation is there for the older son to come in and celebrate too to no longer try to make himself acceptable to God by the things that he does but to accept that God loves him and everything that God has is his and so it is a story of two sons but actually it's the story of the father who is compassionate who is merciful who doesn't treat us as our sins deserve who forgives us at great cost to himself so that we might receive that forgiveness freely that he forgives us for our reckless living he forgives us for our religious living in the worst sense of that phrase and he welcomes us into this celebration he celebrates this morning over a gift and Matthew and Luke he celebrates over each of his children and I wonder is this the morning if you don't know him as your father whether this is the morning that you could come back to him yourself to come to know him yourself to know him as your father let's take a moment to pray as we respond to what we've heard

Lord help us to believe what we've heard about you through from the lips of our saviour Jesus help us to believe that you are this God who welcomes us and deals with our sin covers our shame at great cost to yourself you have brought us into your family and Lord all that so that we might celebrate and rejoice and praise you and Lord we do that now in Jesus name Amen Amen We're going to sing unto you