

Which Lost Son?

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[0 : 00] If you've just joined us this week and missed last Sunday, we're on a mini two-part series as we work our way through Luke. Last week, we looked at the first two of the lost parables.

And to recap, we noticed that it was the common aspects of those two parables that gave us Jesus' main point. And the main point was that God has a heart for the lost, each and every one of us.

And when we realize we're lost and we turn back to Him in repentance, He rejoices and welcomes us back with open arms. This week, we look at the last of the lost parables.

And although similar to the first two, it has important variations that add to the main points of last week's parables. And so, as we've read earlier, you may have noticed that it's not what's lost in this parable, but who are lost.

In this parable, the things lost are not sheep or coin, but sons, sons who are active agents. Moreover, they're not one among many that are lost, but there's just two sons.

[1 : 12] So, although in this parable, God's character is still prominent, we see that in the role of the father, there are also the responses of the sons. It is their actions and words which help us to understand Jesus' additional points.

So, let's resume by looking at verse 11. And we know that Jesus is continuing because it says Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons.

The young one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So, he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the young son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

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.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. Now, many details in this parable would have surprised or even shocked Jesus' Jewish audience.

[2 : 22] The younger son breaks numerous cultural taboos, like asking for his share of the estate, which you do, even nowadays, only when your father dies.

So, it was tantamount to wishing his father dead, really. And instead of investing what he got, he promptly squanders it, and then he leaves his father to do it.

Effectively, he's ending his relationship with him. And then when it all runs out, he finds a job in a pig's farm that is an unclean animal to the Jews.

He works for a Gentile, because he's in a faraway country. But worse than that, he dreams of eating the pig's food.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating. But disgrace upon disgrace, even that is denied to him. And so, any Jew listening to this story would have just looked at this son and shaken their heads.

- [3 : 24] They may have pity for him, but really, no sympathy, because he deserves what he's got. And as I think I mentioned last week, that is really a picture of us as a human race, really. We once enjoyed intimate fellowship with God. That was Adam and Eve's place in the Garden of Eden. But through them, we threw it all away, just for the taste of forbidden fruit. For the taste of autonomy, that is, life without having to worry about the rule of God. And yet, I think, for many of us, we still think that we can enjoy the benefits of having a relationship with God, just without the constraints of having to submit to him. But as the younger son shows, that's just not possible, is it? Without a relationship with God, our life is simply on borrowed time. It's like the inheritance of the youngest son. It dwindles every time he goes to a party. If we cut ourselves off from the source of life, who is God, then we're effectively dead.
- [4 : 35] And yet, as we turn to the response of the father, God doesn't keep us with him against our will. If we want to walk away from God, then sadly, he allows us that wish. Well, in verse 17, reality finally sinks in for this younger son. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? And here I am, starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. And so he got up and went to his father. This is what true repentance looks like. You see, it's one thing to realize that you've done the wrong thing. You might even know what you should do. But true repentance requires that we follow through with it.
- [5 : 40] For the younger son, that meant a long and humbling journey back to the father's house. And all this while, he would still be hungry. He would still be penniless. All this while, he would not know what would happen when he arrived. Will he be accepted? What will everyone think? Many questions, I'm sure, when he walked that long road. And yet for him, it was still better than remaining where he was and wallowing in pity. Inertia, you see, often stops us from repenting, doesn't it? We know what we should do. But repenting actually requires an active turning back to God and changing our lives as a result. Are there sinful habits? Well, we need to start kicking them. Have we wronged someone? Well, we need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Have we lied and cheated? Well, we need to own up to it. And perhaps even pay things back. And often, aren't we, we are gripped by the fear of those consequences.
- [6 : 52] What would happen if we did that? And that stops us from repenting, doesn't it? Well, the truth is, repentance is costly. We're not promised that just because we repent, everything just magically disappears. And all that we've done wrong is raised. Sometimes, often, we will have to face up to those consequences. But the youngest son was wise enough to know that even that, returning to the father, even if it meant humiliation, was far better than where he was. Likewise, for us, it's better to suffer for the wrong we've done than to continue in our sin. So on the slide, I have Psalm 84, verse 10. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. The lowliest position in God's house, even if it's just at the doorstep, is much better than dwelling in luxury with the wicked.

But the wonderful thing is that much as we fear what the consequences might be, God doesn't respond as we fear. So verse 20 again, But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

[8 : 14] He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and earth against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your servant. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast. Let's party. Let's celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive.

He was lost and is found. And so they began to celebrate. It's exactly as we've learned last week. God rejoices when the lost are found.

And again, we see in this father, what he does is really unlike all the other Jewish fathers. It's meant to shock us. For a start, the father maintains a constant vigil for this son of his, this great son.

And then that's what allows him to spot him while he's still a long way off. And when he does, he runs toward him. There's no waiting. No walking.

[9 : 17] It's all rather undignified for a Jewish father. He's filled with compassion for this disgraceful son. He hugs and kisses this pig, smelly, and dirty son of his.

And then he asks the servants to put on the best robe, put the ring on, put the sandals, and, of course, the fattened calf for a party. The punchline, of course, is, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. And friends, God is just like this father. Yes, we've disgraced him. We've run away from him. We've rebelled.

But instead of judging us because we deserve it, he sends his son Jesus instead. I think that's the equivalent of the father running out to his son. Jesus comes to us, doesn't he?

We don't come to Jesus. And in his son, Jesus gets dirty and smelly by dying on the cross for all of us. And so even though I did say earlier that we're not free from facing the sin, the consequences of our sin in life, when it comes to our eternal destiny, well, that has been all paid for by Jesus.

[10 : 30] We don't have to fear God and his judgment. Instead, we're welcome into his kingdom as heirs. But more importantly, we have our relationship with God restored.

And ultimately, that's what counts because we now have a loving father who acts in our best interest. When we pray, he hears us and he does what is for our own good.

He blesses us. And so I want to say that no matter how difficult you find repenting, this alone, this restored relationship, makes it all worthwhile.

And so I plead again, if anyone's still far away from God, then please come back to him. Put your faith in Jesus, his son who died for you. Stop trying to live independently of God.

Taking your inheritance, as it were, and doing it and squandering it. Well, so far what I've said is not different from last week. In fact, it should be exactly the same.

[11 : 34] But we mustn't forget now that there are actually two sons in this parable. And Jesus is rather clever in the way he tells this story because he's actually made us forget that there is a second son, isn't it?

Up to now, he's not been mentioned. Which I think is exactly the grievance of the older son, isn't it? All the attention has been on the younger brother, but what about him?

And that's often the way with the world, isn't it? Just look at the media. All the bad people are the ones that get publicity. The faithful ones, you know, the ones that go to work, hold down a job, pay off their mortgage, feed their families, maybe someone like me.

We don't get a mention, do we? We don't get a mention in the news. And so I think the brother's response echoes the line of this song. Many of you might know this, a Moving Pictures song.

Shannon Noll has revived it. I sang it this morning, so they said I had to sing it again now, so here you go. The song goes like this.

[12 : 40] What about me? It isn't fair. I've had enough. Now I want my share. Can't you see? I want to live. You just take more than you give.

Actually, if you read the parable, that's not what happens with the older son. Instead, look with me. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. Probably this song.

I don't know. Maybe not. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fat calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The other brother became angry and refused to go in, so his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

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 all your property with prostitutes come home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

[13 : 46] I don't know about you, but you know, I'm actually with the older brother here. Fair is fair, right? I mean, if bad people get rewarded, I mean, what's, why do right?

As the older son says, he spent a lifetime doing the right thing. And he doesn't even get a young goat, let alone a fatted calf. Now come on, that's, it's really unfair, isn't it?

So, I don't know about you, but I totally get the older brother. I totally get his anger and his refusal to go in. But when we see the father's response, we realize that no matter how justified he may be, he's actually wrong.

You see, the father graciously goes out and pleads with him, not chastise him. And this is what he says in verse 31. My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. The father actually, I think, raises two things.

[15 : 00] First, he appeals to his relationship with the son. You are always with me. Everything I have is yours. That's better than any robe or ring or fatted calf.

He's still got his share of the estate. He hasn't squandered it. But more importantly, he's never left his father's house. Would you trade that away for a stint with the pigs?

Sure. You might have a few wild parties at some wild, exotic, faraway place. That may seem exciting for a while, but that always catches up on you, doesn't it? Sin, sinful pleasures always has its consequences.

You end up paying for it. Not so when you're in the father's house. But secondly, the father also reminds him of his relationship with his brother. We note in verse 30, the son bitterly notes, this son of yours has squandered your property.

But then the father gently reminds him, No, this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. You see, we're not individually related to God as our father only, are we?

[16 : 14] If we're related to God, then everyone else in God's kingdom is our brother and sister. But more than that, when we have a relationship with God, what it means too is that we ought to take on God's heart and perspective, don't we?

This father is pleading, can't you see your brother was dead and now is alive? He was lost and now found. God rejoices over the sinner who repents.

The question then is, do we as well? Now obviously, we know that Jesus was referring to the Pharisees. They were the target of the parables. That's how the three parables started when the Pharisees questioned Jesus.

If you look at it, they were behaving just like their old son, older son, weren't they? They've been at the temple all the time doing the right thing, obeying, learning and obeying the law to the nth degree.

But then they look down, don't they, on others who don't. And then Jesus comes along, he claims to be from God and he eats with those that haven't obeyed the law, the sinners and the tax collectors.

[17 : 23] So the Pharisees are being shown to be like the older brother. And I guess the question is then put to us as well, are we like the older brothers? Because I think in one sense we all are, aren't we?

There's always within us that spirit of self-righteousness, of pride that the Pharisees had. And I've, you know, I think about this and I think in one sense it's a bit of a catch-22 situation, is it?

Because God, it's not like God has asked us to do bad things. No, he actually wants us to do the right things, doesn't he? He wants us to live his way faithfully. And yet, the tricky thing is that the more we do that, and I know a lot of us as Christians do that out of obedience to him, out of faith in Jesus even, that the more we do that, the more we are tempted, aren't we, to be self-righteous.

Some of us who have grown up in a Christian home, we may feel a little bit cheated. You know, we hear testimonies of people with dramatic conversions, and we go, where's my story?

Where's my party? For others, you may decide to obey God and therefore bypass some opportunities in life. You know, you prioritize serving in church rather than chasing your career.

[18 : 42] You try and live simply and give generously to mission. And then along comes someone, perhaps someone you knew from school. He spent his years climbing the corporate ladder, made lots of money, and then he has this dramatic conversion.

And he still gets to keep his mansion in Turek. And then all of a sudden, everyone wants to hear his story, not yours. I do have a good story, but anyway, that's another thing.

Or, take another one that someone mentioned at Bible study, take Kanye West. You know, I'd rather have Gideon every Sunday up here at church, faithfully serving week in, week out for many years.

But all of a sudden, Kanye West becomes a Christian, and what happens? The Christian wolf falls over themselves trying to get him to the church, you know, get him to perform, get him to give the testimony.

I mean, he's married to a Kardashian. I mean, come on. I need to repent as well, yes. Even God can make the Kardashians repent.

[19 : 52] But you see, the danger is we start thinking like that, and there's a risk that we become lost again, don't we? Because we're lost when we start to think we deserve this.

All this good stuff we've done is what makes our relationship with God right instead of what God has done. But really, if you think about it, neither son has done anything to deserve the father's estate.

The older son may not have squandered it, but he didn't deserve it in the first place, did he? The father gave it to him. Now, interestingly, Jesus ends the story just like that.

He doesn't tell us how the older son responds. And I think part of that is to force the Pharisees and us as well to think about how we would respond. And how we respond, I think, says more about us than about the people that we're angry with and don't want to repent.

If we can't rejoice with sinners, then we need to ask ourselves why that is. If we think it's unfair, does it not reveal that we think we deserve God's forgiveness and grace more than they do?

[21 : 04] It's a bit like Jonah, isn't it, in that other reading that we had. Just ask yourself, is there someone in your life you really don't want to see repent? Perhaps they've wronged you.

Perhaps, like Jonah, you're more than willing to even call out their faults. God, I'm happy to do that, just as you don't make them repent as a result.

But notice God's response to Jonah, verse 10 and 11. But the Lord said, You have been concerned about this plant which I provided, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and also many animals.

Jonah was upset with the Nineveh because they were this powerful nation that had come through Israel and caused them a lot of grief. He didn't want them to repent, not after what they had done.

[22 : 06] But just like Jonah, we need to be reminded, don't we, that no one deserves God's goodness. forgiveness. We don't have to fall really, really low and spend time with the pigs to know that actually we don't deserve what we've got.

In fact, the fact that we haven't fallen that low is actually an act of grace by God in and of itself. Because if you talk to people who have gone to the depths of their life and then come back up because of God, they carry, don't they, that experience, the baggage, some of that trauma.

And they would tell you actually you're blessed if you grow up in a loving home, in a loving Christian family. It may not sound glamorous, and some of you I know have loving Christian parents, doesn't sound very glamorous, but it's truly a gift from God.

You see, at the end of the day, there's only really one person in this world that's entitled to be angry. He deserves to do that because he's never been lost. And his name, as you know, is Jesus.

And yet, when you look at his life, what does he do instead? He willingly lays it down, doesn't he, for all the lost sons in the world, that's all of us. Imagine him hanging on the cross and the Pharisees come along to mock him.

[23 : 23] They thought he had, you know, they thought they had the last laugh, didn't they? And yet, what does he say from the cross? Father, forgive them. Likewise, as he hung on the cross, in agony and pain, and the thief beside him asked for forgiveness, he was in pain.

But let me tell you, he was also rejoicing with heaven, wasn't he? Because the Father was rejoicing. Because that one repentant sinner, right beside him, had just returned to God.

Friends, you know, I speak personally, but the sense of fairness is very strong in many of us, you know, isn't it? But you know what? God can see our faithfulness.

One day, he will command us. In fact, right now, he takes pleasure when we obey him humbly. But at the same time, he also wants us to have the same heart that he does for the lost.

Sometimes, we may not even feel like rejoicing. We may not even feel like forgiving those who have hurt us when they repent. But let's do it anyway.

[24 : 35] Let's not think that some people are beyond repentance and should be. Whether they're the bad people in society or actually the good people, the do-gooders that just get up your nose all the time because they're so self-righteous.

Because God can make anyone, can't he, turn back and repent and find him again. or be found by him. He can raise anyone who's dead to life.

Let's pray. Father, please guard us from the sin of self-righteous pride. Please help us to keep repenting of the attitude that you love us because we have done good.

Help us to look to Jesus who even though he was righteous, rejoiced when sinners repent. Help us to be like Jesus who even though he was justified, still forgave those who sinned against him.

And it's in his mighty name we pray. Amen. Amen.