

The Parable of the Two Sons

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Luke 15, we're going to continue studying the parables of Jesus Christ and perhaps find ourselves in the most well-loved parable of all.

You know, J.C. Ryle said about this, he said, a few chapters of the Bible perhaps have done more good to the souls of men than this one. He encourages us, let us take heed that it does good to us. So we're going to study the parable of the prodigal son. And I'm just excited, I hope you are too, for us to dive into it for a few moments. We begin in, I'm going to read verse 1 to 3, and then we'll jump down to 11 to the end of the chapter.

Verse 1, Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

[1 : 12] So he told them this parable. Let's look down at verse 11. He says, And he said, There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.

And he divided the property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property in reckless living.

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. And no one gave him anything. Verse 17, But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish with hunger?

I will arise and go to my father. And I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

[2 : 30] 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.

And the son said to the father, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him.

And put a ring in his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it. And let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called to one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.

[3 : 42] But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.

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.

But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, Son, you are always with me.

And all that is mine is yours. It is fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this your brother was dead and is alive.

He was lost and is found. That is the word of God. The very word of God God has in mind for us this morning.

[4 : 52] There's so much here. But let me just briefly kind of recap the details before we unpack the meaning of this parable. You know, it's quite obvious that father has two sons. I mean, a lot of us are just familiar with the details of this story because we've heard it so many times.

But the younger son comes to the father. He says, Give me the half of my inheritance, which he was going to receive at the end of the father's life. And the father gives it to him, even though it's deeply offensive.

He gives him half of what he owns. Years go by and this younger son wastes it all until he's broke with nothing to show for it. You know, we see that vivid scene.

Things get so bad, he hires himself out to be a slave. That's the way slavery was in that day. And he finds himself eating with filthy pigs. And there, kind of lying in their filth, he realizes that even the servants of his father's house eat better than he does.

So he journeys home, fully intending to be a servant in his father's house for life. Right? And what comes next is unexpected when he returns home.

[5 : 59] The father throws a party and just a grand celebration fills the house. But the parable doesn't end there. There's another son, the older son.

He remained home all the years. When he hears the music and dancing and hears that his brothers come home, he refuses to join the celebration.

He gets angry. The father comes out to him. What's going on, man? Son, what's going on? He essentially says, look, I've served you these many years, yet you've never thrown a party for me. But this wicked, worthless son of yours comes home and you celebrate.

The father appeals, you're wrong, son. You are always with me. All that is mine is yours. What he's saying there is that when I do die, since I've given the half away to my other son, everything else is yours.

You don't have a fattened calf now, but you have everything. Who knows? Hundreds of fattened calves will be yours. But for now, come and eat. And the story ends with the older son outside.

[7 : 10] And the celebration continuing. So what are we to make of this parable? You know, most of the time we hear sermons focused on the younger son, the prodigal son and his return.

But is that the main thing the Lord wants us to see? Now, don't get me wrong, the parable, the prodigal son, the younger son's story is incredible. But is that what he wants us to see?

Look down in verse 1 to 3 to get our context. Jesus says the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to him, and the Pharisees and scribes were also there too, and grumbling, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

And then he tells a parable. The idea is that there's two groups of people coming to hear from Jesus. There's the tax collectors and sinners, the bad people. And then there's the Pharisees and scribes, the good people.

And Jesus' attention, what he tells us from the start, his attention is on the scribes and Pharisees. From the beginning, he tells this story to confront them. Now, we often refer to this parable as the parable of the prodigal son.

[8 : 19] Now, prodigal is an old word. We don't use it anymore, but it just means recklessly extravagant, wastefully extravagant.

So we call this parable of the prodigal son because he was wastefully extravagant with his father, or with his inheritance, right? But if we remember our context and look more closely, we'll see that this parable may not be about the wastefulness of the son.

Yes, the son did squander his property and reckless living, but the original audience would not have been captivated by what the son did. It's the wastefulness of the father that would have stood out to them.

Look at me. When the younger son comes home and essentially says, Father, you're dead to me. Give me my inheritance. They would have expected the father to do only one thing, which is drive him away.

In a patriarchal society in which the father owned everything and held great father, the youngest son's request is most offensive and disrespectful.

[9 : 37] The only proper response would be to cut him off forever. But the father doesn't, right? At great loss of wealth and respect in the community, he gives his son his inheritance earlier, and you

can almost hear the scribes and Pharisees saying, What a fool.

What a waste. What a stupid story. What kind of respectable man does that?

And if that's not enough, the father does not stop there. After years of reckless living, the son comes home, and we know that story. He comes to his senses. He plans to humble himself and serve and work for his father in slavery all his life.

And before he even arrives, the father, and before he can even work off one bit of the debt, the father just runs to him, kisses him, and throws a massive party. It's incredible.

And we almost think the story should be over. Because if you look at the context of two previous parables, you remember the parable of the lost sheep? The shepherd has the hundred sheep.

[10:41] One goes astray. He leaves the 99 to find that one. He says, I've found this one. He throws a party. The same thing with a woman. She has ten coins. She loses one. When she goes out, sweeps her whole house, finds this coin, she throws a party.

So here we're at the party. That's what it's essentially saying. We would expect the party or the story to be over because the father announces the son who is dead is alive, and the son who is lost is found.

And when it seems over, Jesus brilliantly continues.

Until this point, the Pharisees and scribes, you've got to understand, they would have barely listened. They would have said, nonsense, nonsense. Just another story about God chasing down sinners, about Jesus chasing down sinners, another story about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners.

Remember, John came fasting, and Jesus came feasting, and they hated it. But there's another son. The older son, he never leaves his father's side, never wastes anything.

[11:48] He's the good son. He always obeyed. Yet when the younger son comes home and the celebration begins, he refuses to come in. He's angry. He's offended. The story closes with the father going out to him and appealing him to come here.

And precisely here, the Pharisees and scribes would have been riveted. Until this moment, they would not have cared. But at this moment, they would have been riveted because Jesus essentially comes to them and says to them, you are the older son.

You refuse to rejoice in God's salvation. That's why you grumble. You have it all wrong. You think you're special because of the good you do, but it's driving you far from God.

The point now seems clear. The point of this parable is not a parable of the prodigal son. It's the parable of two sons who lose their way. The younger son is not rejected because of his wastefulness, and the older son is not accepted because of his thriftiness.

The younger son isn't cast off because of his bad choices and reckless living, and the older son isn't taken in because of his good choices. And wives living. Do you see? The point is, the greatest prodigal in this story is not either son.

[13:01] The greatest prodigal is the father who wasted all to gain back his son. The whole story turns on him. He loses everything.

To gain his son, he begs him to come in. He wants nothing else for them to know his love.

And here we're meant to draw a straight line from this father to our father in heaven. It's precisely here that this story is most staggering. It's not most staggering that the son came to his senses.

Even that the father ran out to him. What's most staggering is God does not care about any of those things. He does not give lavishly to those who do good and does not withhold from those who are bad. He does not care about those things.

All that he wants is for us, his children, to know his love and his willingness to waste it all, even his very dear son, in order to show it.

[14:01] He holds nothing back. He who did not spare his own son will not nickel and dime us now. He puts it all in the line. He's saying, give your life to those and come and see the father gives all he has to reckless sinners.

He gives all he has to guilty sinners. The father is the greatest prodigal of all.

I want to break this out. Like I said, there's just so much here. I think you could do six weeks on this parable. We don't have that long.

The first point is, sin is more than breaking a rule. It's wanting anyone or anything more than God. This parable redefines so many things in so many ways.

It's the kernel truth of the Christian life. Some have said the world is divided between younger brothers and older brothers, as you probably know by experience.

[15:12] The older sibling in a family plays by the rules. They obey mom and dad, right? They try to please them. They know the rules. They're focused on the rules and they follow the rules.

You know, older kids are all about fair. If I hear that word once every week, I hear it about 50 times that it's not fair.

You know, right now you're probably thinking of your oldest family member. I'm definitely not an oldest son. So that may tell you something about me in a moment. Or your oldest child who likes fairness.

In the end, older siblings live a normal life, a great successful life. Not trying to throw older siblings under the bus. The younger siblings often different. They're free spirits.

They rebel and buck the system. They want the love and admiration of friends more than mom and dad. They usually avoid a normal life at all costs and try to find themselves and chase something bigger.

[16:15] We see this division everywhere. You know, some people believe the way to find your life and the true, and what's true and right is to do what your parents did or what they tell you to do, what others tell you to do.

And so they go through life trying to do the right thing. You've probably heard that before. You know, someone say, I've always tried to do the right thing. Now I'm here. That's kind of older son type thinking, older sibling type thinking.

Others believe that the way to find your life is to find out what's true for you and to do what makes you happy. You know, Tim Keller said there's three things our culture's always trying to teach us right now.

One, you've got to be true to yourself. Two, in the end, you've got to do what makes you happy.

Three, no one has the right to tell you what is right and true for you.

That pretty much sums it up. You've got to do what's true for yourself. In the end, you've got to do what makes you happy. No one has the right to tell you what is right and true for you. That's younger son language.

[17:15] And so our world and culture are deeply divided between these two ways to live. The one way of tradition, one way of self-discovery, one way of rules and one way of freedom.

But in this parable, Jesus wonderfully and brilliantly cuts between the two and reveals the emptiness of both paths. The parable is about two lost sons.

One is bad by the world's standard and is lost. One is good and is lost. You know, neither one finds their way.

Both are far from God and more similar than we realize. They both don't truly love the father. They want what the father has, not the father.

Now, in the younger son, as is usually the case, it's more obvious. He demands the inheritance. He wastes it all chasing the life of a dream. It's obvious what he's all about. And if we have a younger kid, it's easy to think that their sin is the main thing to focus on in the family because it's out there.

[18:20] You know, you know people or you know me. I was like that. My sin was always out there. My brother's sins was always kind of under the covers a little bit. The older sin is more subtle.

He does everything right. When the father asked him why he doesn't come in and enjoy the feast, he says, because I never disobeyed you. Now think about that.

Why don't you come in and join the feast to celebrate with your brother because I never disobeyed you. Like I said, older sons are all about fairness. So essentially he's saying this is not fair. It's no less demanding.

That's the point. He's saying, he's saying, I never disobeyed you all these years and now you should give me what I want. My obedience was not free. It was, it was a transaction to try to get something from you.

Does that make sense? So one, one son rebelled by doing everything right and the other son did by, rebelled by doing everything wrong. Both sons failed to love and enjoy and serve their father.

[19:26] Tim Keller says you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by keeping all of them diligently. That's the scary thing. Jesus is redefining sin.

Essentially he's saying sin is not merely breaking a rule. It's wanting anything, anyone or anything more than God. You know, when somebody asks us what is sin, if you're walking into Food City or

something like that this week and somebody asks you what is sin, our first definition, our, you know, our closest definition is usually sin's breaking a rule.

It's missing a mark. You know, and then we go to Romans. It says, all fall short of the glory of God. So all, don't hit the mark. You know, I've heard preachers use the idea of an arrow being thrown just short of the mark.

And that is true. Right? Ever sin against the law is guilty for breaking the whole law and so there is something about sinning against the law but this parable wants us to see sin more deeply.

Sin's not merely breaking an external law. Sin is rebellion in the heart. It's wanting anything or anyone, however good they may be or however good they may seem more than God.

[20 : 38] If that's true, then sin can be seen in disobeying God to chase after the things you want from life and sin can be seen in obeying God to demand the things you want from Him.

In both ways, sin is writing my own story and asking God to endorse it. I make the agenda. you endorse it.

Sin's never break, merely breaking a rule. It's always wanting something more. It's always something, it's always idolatry ultimately. You know, it could be something bad.

It could be sexually immoral relationship or acceptance you feel through something like pornography. It could be a craving for more and lying that goes on with cheating your taxes.

It could be pursuing something forbidden by your parents but often in our little circles it's not something bad, it's something otherwise good.

[21 : 45] Good grades. I was never a good enough student to hit that one but you can get there where hell is a C.

and heaven is an A. It turns the world upside down. For you it can be a romantic relationship. I just want this.

You know, it could be respect from your teenage kids and that's a tricky one. You know, as parents we are commanded to say honor your father and mother for it's right but we can twist that by demanding it.

you must respect me with the wickedness of our heart. God doesn't want us to be focused on rules. That's the point. He wants us to see sin as wanting anyone or anything more than God.

It's a good word. Second, salvation is more than being right with the judge. It is being loved by the father. Salvation is more than being right with the judge.

[22 : 51] It's being loved by the father. As I've said this parable redefines so many things and one of the things it does is it redefines salvation. The parable revolves around the father as we've said upon first reading we often read it through the eyes of the younger son.

We often put ourselves in his shoes. We often are staggered by what he loses in running away and getting his inheritance early and wasting all that money and being down there with the pigs but the story is actually about the loss the father endures.

That's the point because the shepherd lost his sheep the woman lost her coin and the father lost his son and that's not where we often stop and so when the father comes home you see the longing for his son that had been there all along and his joy is unsurpassed.

I want to read it just again because it's so wonderful. When the son comes home he sees him he feels compassion he runs to him embraces him and kisses him and throws a party for his son. The idea and what we should take away is that in that society men didn't act like that.

They didn't run. They didn't show external affection. No PDA between father and son in that culture but that's what he does.

[24 : 09] Look in verse 22 he says bring quickly the best robe put it on him put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it let us celebrate my son was dead and is alive he was lost and he's found he's over the top and what he's trying to say to us is that the heart of the Christian faith is not a God who judges but a father who loves.

We boil down the Christian faith it's not about a God who judges but a father who loves. We don't often think of Christianity this way I don't think of Christianity this way I don't present the gospel this way I often hear the gospel presented that we find ourselves in a courtroom you've heard it too God the judge is up there we the guilty are at the table trying to defend ourselves and what we're told and what we should realize when we hear that is that we are guilty before him we conclude that the most important thing we need more than anything else is the sentence of not guilty and of course that's true partially in many ways even when we look at the sacrifice of Jesus Christ we bring in

those courtroom ideas we think of God as little more than a judge we think of we think that God loves us because Christ died for us rather than being assured that Christ died for us because God loves us now if you get that those are worlds apart

Christ did not die for or God does not love us because Christ died for us Christ died for us because God loved us at the heart of Christianity the foundation of Christianity is not a God who judges but a Father who loves and all the Bible will not let us stop until we see that both sons fail to see it both ultimately believe the Son is someone or the Father is someone to be appeased to be satisfied both sons believe they're called to perform both fail to see the Father as someone to be loved and the parable points to the greatest wonder of the Christian faith that God adopts sinners that's the core of this story J.I. Packer says it like this adoption is a family idea not a courtroom idea conceived in terms of love and viewing

God as Father in adoption God takes us into his family and fellowship he establishes us as his children and heirs closeness affection and generosity at the heart of the relationship to be right with God the judge is a great thing but to be loved and cared for by the Father is a greater thing the heart of the Christian faith is a Father who loves with personal particular and passionate love you know they say a picture is worth a thousand words and several years ago the picture of a young five year old boy pulled from the wreckage in Syria captured the world like no headline ever could social media exploded nations deliberated leaders responded parents of every nation looked into that boy's eyes and could imagine how they would respond if that was their son some children even responded one six year old boy wrote a letter to the president that I find just incredible he said dear president

Obama remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria can you please go get him and bring him to my home park in the driveway or on the street and we'll be waiting for you guys with flags flowers and balloons we will give him a family and he'll be our brother in my school I have a friend from Syria Omar and I'll introduce Omar we can all play together he continues please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy just like him since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys Catherine my sister will share her big blue stripy white bunny and I will share my bike and I'll teach him how to ride it I'll teach him addition and subtraction and he can smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green she doesn't let anyone touch it though

[29 : 08] I can't wait for you to come I just find that phrase stands out we will give him a family and he will be our brother in so many ways the message of the Bible is not about a judge trying to get a verdict but about a father trying to find a son he's saying we'll give you a family we'll give you a brother would you just come home my heart is broken would you come home I just want you to be with me you'll be my son and I'll be your father it's the plea for everyone who's lost their way whether it's by doing everything wrong or by doing everything right John Owen said it like this the greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the father the greatest unkindness you can do to him is to not believe that he loves you now that's not the way

I would think that sentence would end the greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the father what would grieve his heart the most the greatest unkindness you can do to him is to not believe he loves you now I wouldn't complete that sentence that way without looking at this parable when you see it that's what he's trying to proclaim the heart of the Christian faith is a father who loves you know I wonder if our children think the greatest unkindness they can do to us is believe we don't love them would they say that more than anything else dad just wants me to know I love him or would they say more than anything else dad just wants me to know not to disobey him or not to embarrass him or not to interrupt him as Christians and as fathers we have this incredible opportunity to imitate that kind of fatherhood it's incredible thirdly obedience is more than duty it is the overflow of delight obedience is more than duty it's the overflow of delight the parable redefines obedience both sons believe the key to receiving love from the father is obedience both sons misunderstand what sonship means they basically think sonship means being a slave the younger son plans to come home dutifully work off his debt the older son dutifully works all the years and assumes his father loves him because of it both misunderstand what it means to be a son and both set off to trying to please the father in wrong ways and so this parable redefines obedience for us it's so vital we get the message of the parable if we don't we'll never understand obedience the last fall well-known author

Eugene Peterson died at the age of 85 he's great pastor great pastor of pastors he's also a great father I just found it so incredible at his funeral his son said that his father only had one message for

him I'm gonna be that type of dad my kids are so often confused because I got a hundred messages for them that change every day he said his son his son said his father had one message that he whispered into his heart for 50 years and often snuck into his room to whisper into his ear as a boy the message was God loves you God's on your side he's coming after you he's relentless God loves you God's on your side he's coming after you he's relentless that's what I want my kids to take away I know that's what you want too I love this little book by Noel Piper your daddy loves you your mommy loves you your brother loves you flip the page or sometimes he loves you but your sister loves you and then it goes through maybe grandmothers and granddads or whatever and then it ends with most of all

God loves you most of all I mean that's our role as parents is to say most of all most of all thankfully son the love does not stop with me most of all God loves you that's the that's the truth there's limits to what I can do there's limits to my love but the father has no limits and if we can proclaim that to our kids that's we're proclaiming them the core of Christianity this is where Christianity is utterly unique Tim Keller said every other religion says I obey therefore I'm accepted the gospel says I'm accepted therefore I obey only in the gospel do you get the verdict before and so we don't have to obey for love we don't have to obey for acceptance we obey from it we don't have to obey for delight we obey from it and having this acceptance it changes obedience completely it turns it on its head it's no longer trying to run some rat race trying to please some

God in heaven it's running because he's pleased so how do we work this out I fear that we who know the gospel and love the gospel often work this out in the wrong way I'm running out of time so I have to move quickly but often I feel that good works get a bad name like we know we can't earn our salvation and so we kind of view good works like if they come great if they don't also great you know it's kind of a delight we just crave them we want them because we know that these good works they don't contribute to our salvation but they please the father and that's the heartbeat of our lives good works have been prepared for us the scriptures say good works are to be our passionate desire Romans 12:11 says do not be slothful and zeal be fervent in the spirit serve the

[35 : 44] Lord good works are satisfying to us one of the most convicting phrases to me in our Bible is Jesus says it's my food to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work good works are definitely not to get me greater acceptance with God but they are my food they satisfy me not because I measure myself up better to someone else but because I remember why I'm here why so striking isn't it this parable we could take five more weeks on unlocks the core of Christianity and at the heart of it all is a father who wasted all to sinners who deserve nothing but wrath oh let us live in the good of it let me pray for it father in heaven we thank you for this day thank you for your mercy we pray God you would drive these truths deeper into our hearts father often we fall on either side of this parable either desperately trying to do what is right or carrying around guilt because of what we've done wrong and

God we pray that you would by your spirit just as your word promises your spirit would resonate with our spirit claim to us that we are children of God and need not do anything else to make you pleasing but Lord we do pray that this would drive us to pour out our lives for Jesus Christ there is no greater treasure we have there's no one we want more work in our hearts in Jesus name amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com B