

The Lost Sons

October 2, 2016

Luke 15:11-32

This morning, we take on the third of the “Lost” parables from Luke 15. First it was the lost sheep, then the lost coin, and today, the lost son, or as I’ve suggested the lost sons, or as you probably know it, the parable of the prodigal son. But in truth, I really think the lost sons is the true understanding of this text.

This parable is one of the best known of all the parables. Everyone knows the story: a son seeks and receives his inheritance early and cashes it in and goes off to squander it on wild living. Just at the time when he runs out of money, a famine happens to hit where he lives, and he is forced to hire out to a local farmer and ends up feeding pigs and eating their pea pods because he had no food.

At that point, he comes to his senses, remembers that his father’s servants eat better than that, and decides to go back and humble himself before his father, offering to become his father’s servant rather than son. His father meets him and greets him with joy and throws a feast to celebrate. Meanwhile the older brother refuses to come to the party, complaining that his father never gave him anything. And that is how the parable ends.

There. Sound familiar? But what is the point? What is the connection to the other “lost” parables? They all have something lost being found. They all have celebrations. But this time, there is added emphasis on the other brother, the one who did not run off and squander, or did he...?

Ah, this is the interesting part often neglected about this parable, the role of the older brother. And when you stop to think about it, who is Jesus telling this parable to? Prodigals? Or those who perceive themselves as remaining faithful? Yes, they see themselves as the older brother. So, the part we too often neglect in the story is really the part that Jesus intends to be a zinger to His audience. I think we had better spend some time unpacking this classic parable.

First, let’s read it through. It is longer than any thus far, so be patient.
READ Luke 1-3 and 11-32.

Main point: We are all prodigals, but some of us haven’t recognized it yet.

In a sense, I have just given away the whole sermon, but I need to make the point. We have no problem seeing the prodigal as a prodigal, as a wayward child who needs to come back. What is more applicable to the context is the fact that the older son is just as much a prodigal. He just doesn't recognize it yet.

And in between the two is the patient, watching father, who loves both of his sons, even if they both fail to appreciate it. Yes, this parable is rich and full.

I. The setting: Jesus should not spend His time with the deplorables. vv.1-3

We have already gone through this section twice, so I am not going to take much time here to unpack it. But I do want you to remember the setting. Jesus, this preacher out of nowhere, has been drawing huge crowds, yuge crowds! And that fact has ticked off the Jewish leaders. Clearly, they are jealous and looking for a reason to condemn and marginalize Jesus. They think they have found it in the types of people they see flocking to Him. It is not the good and religious, but "those people," the deplorables as we have been calling them. They are known, not by their names, nor even by their Jewish heritage, but by the things they do that are disgusting. They are "sinners" and tax collectors, people who earn their livings in deplorable ways, by selling themselves to the enemy.

So they start muttering about Jesus, that He chooses to associate, to fellowship with the bad people. Jesus replies to their muttering with a parable, actually three of them, all around the theme of finding that which is lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. Now we are ready to look more closely at the parable of the prodigal.

II. The parable: The Father celebrates when His prodigal sons turn back to Him. vv. 11-32

The father, who is underappreciated in this story, joyfully celebrates the return of prodigals. It is who He is, always has been, always will be.

v.11- Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons.¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

In my mind, this is the most difficult section of the parable. Here you have an ungrateful son, who asks for his share of the inheritance...and the father gives it to him. Why? What was he thinking?

I mean the wording used tells us he has no right to it. He asks the father for his share of the estate. By definition, you get your share when the father dies. And yet, the father gives it to him when the son is still young and foolish. Then we notice that he is the younger son. Culturally, the older son would have gotten a double portion to that of the younger. Even as a son, he was in no position to make such request. And then notice the wording of the request, “Give me my share...” Excuse me but no. You have no right to treat your father like that...but he does. And he does give it to him. Notice again the wording, “So he divided his property between them.” Did you catch that? He divided his property between them. Let me put it a different way, “each son got his share.” Right? So, at that point, how much does the father have left? Nothing. He has given it all, two thirds to the oldest son and one third to the youngest son. Right?

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

The wording here suggests he converted it to cash. In other words, the property itself (whatever it was) meant nothing to him. He saw it not as his heritage to be preserved, or precious resources to be managed carefully, but cash to be spent. In other words, he was thinking like any teenage or young adult son. It was cash to be spent. He saw it only as a commodity to be traded, cash that he could do with as he wanted.

And the text tells us that he went to a distant land and spent it on wild living, on wine, women, and song. Why a distant land? Because it is always greener over there, better over there. No one would know him over there. He could do what he wanted with no guilt over there.

He squandered it. He wasted it on momentary, foolish, disgusting lusts and passions. It is not that he bought property that he wanted, or even luxuries that

he could show off. He spent it on things that satisfied desires for the briefest of moments. He squandered it. He spent it all and had nothing to show for it.

¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

This verse should hit us hard. He spent it all, and had nothing to show for it. Now he is in trouble. Famine has come. Resources are scarce and pricey. There is a scramble for food. Now when he needs it, he has nothing. Who could have predicted a famine? Notice it's not just that he was in need, but the famine hit the whole country. There is nowhere to turn, no one to help him.

¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

My, how far he has fallen. He was a high roller used to flashing his wealth around, getting whatever he wanted at whatever the cost. Everyone probably came to him to seek to please him. Now that he has nothing, he is left to beg, to scrounge for work wherever he can find it. And he ends up finding it with one of the locals, who had some pigs. He is so low he has to make a living feeding pigs. Can you imagine? Hey wait! I grew up feeding pigs. I was so used to them I didn't even think they stunk.

Added to this, the story is told from a Jewish perspective. Pigs not only stunk, but they were unclean and unfit to eat. So, he was left to make his living feeding unclean animals he could not, he would not eat. Nothing could have been worse.

¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

By this time, even that which he was feeding the pigs looked good. The pigs were just eating the scraps, the pods, the husks, the leftover parts after the fruit was harvested. Then he realizes that he can't even have them. They looked good to him, but he had to feed them to the pigs. So in reality, he was considered

lower than the pigs. The pigs' lives were worth more than his. That is low! Here he was, an outsider with nothing, no status, no connections, no friends. No one would give him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

Finally! He is beginning to think straight. He doesn't have to be in this place. The hired servants of his father have plenty to eat, more than enough. He would not go hungry in his father's household, even if he was just one of the hired servants. It makes no sense to starve to death when food is readily available from one who treated his servants better than that.

¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

Notice he thought it through before he went back. He would confess to his father (and to his heavenly Father). He would claim no status as son, but see if his father would make room for him in his household as a simple servant. Notice the choice was son or free, and he chose free. Now it is free foreigner, or a servant to one who knows him, and he chose to go back home.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Don't miss the detail here. The father saw him from far away. It is almost as if the father was standing, watching and waiting, scanning the horizon, hoping that this would be the day that his prodigal would come home. Every parent of a prodigal knows what this means. They've been there. They pray and they wait. The prodigal thinks they'll be angry. But the truth is they will be met with tears of joy and arms that can't wait to embrace. Every parent of a prodigal yearns for the day when they can say, "Welcome home!" Right?

And yet, expectation of the opposite is the fear that keeps such prodigals away. There is shame, fear, humiliation. They remember the last conversation, when the parent was pleading with them not to go. It was hard, rough, hurtful even. They envision the same now. They are waiting for the “I told you so.” Instead, what awaits is, “You’re home! Let’s celebrate!”

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

Notice the change in perspective. Before it was, give me what’s mine (even though it is not mine yet). Now, it is “I deserve nothing.” What a change! Tell me, which would make a father’s heart glad? Which would be a cause of celebration? Notice the recognition that all sin is ultimately against God, but is against people as well. Many times we neglect to deal with both levels, but both levels need to be accounted for.

²² “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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

Again, every parent of a prodigal understands this whole scene. Yes, there is an attempt to put the returning child in the center of attention, but for a good reason. They’ve returned! Let’s celebrate. We’ve been fattening up that prized calf all this time hoping, waiting for this day, and now it has come. Fire up the grill! Invite the neighborhood. What was dead to me has come alive. The lost has been found! If there was a celebration for a sheep, for a coin, how much more for a son! And make no mistake, the son is still a son!

There, that is the end of the parable of the prodigal. The wayward son has returned to the arms of his loving father, who has welcomed him, honored him, celebrated his return. Indeed, I don’t think we need to do much application. I think we inherently all understand. Our hearts ache for parents still waiting. Our hearts break for prodigals still squandering. We all yearn to celebrate, even if we

have to do so in a muted way lest we offend the one returning. But know this, we want to celebrate.

And yes, this parable has great application in a literal sense and in a spiritual sense, for so often they are combined in our world. Often, the lure of self pleasure takes the form of running after pleasures at the same time as running away from God. So, it is true on both levels. Jesus' time with "sinners" was truly Him celebrating their return to their heavenly Father. But it also included their swearing off of their worldly pursuits. It is both. There, the parable is done. Right? Not so fast.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

Ah, the older brother! The brother who stayed home. The "faithful" one. He missed the homecoming. He was too busy working. He was doing what he was supposed to be doing. Right? He stumbles upon the scene and it takes him by surprise. What's all the fuss about?

²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

Instinctively, we all know what is next. This is his "brother", THAT brother, the black sheep brother, the one who has given us all a bad name. He's back. A brother in this sense has the opposite perspective as a father. The brother wishes he would stay away, never return. Already, we know (because we know ourselves) that the return of the younger brother is going to be met with disgust, not joy.

Pause: I can remember literally being in such a position. I can remember saying out loud, "I don't care if I ever speak to my brother for the rest of my life!" while he was still living a sinful life. It hurts to recount it, but it is true. In fact, I later told my brother that I had said these words. I now embrace him with a big hug every time I see him. He is very precious to me. But we all know instinctively this perspective.

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

Did you catch this? The older brother is now the one away, separated from the family. He is refusing to be involved in family celebrations. Notice the father goes out to him to plead with him to return. Are you catching the point? Who is the prodigal now? Do you suppose he sees himself as a prodigal? Of course not. He feels justified, smug, righteous in his anger. But he is just as much a prodigal, even if it has taken a different form. He has separated himself from the family. He has failed to embrace the family DNA. He does not share the Father’s perspective. In fact, perhaps we can best say it that way. His refusal to celebrate what the father is celebrating shows he is not really part of the family. Being part of the family means sharing the father’s perspective.

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

Ouch! These words hurt. I resemble his remarks. Again, we don’t have to do much unpacking to see the application. For those of us who see ourselves as never rebelling, this is like a crystal clear mirror. All that work, all that effort, all that restraining of our desires, and for what! He got to have all the fun that we secretly wished we could have. And for what! We don’t even get to have a party once in awhile. What a waste! Can you see the problem? Yes, faithful children too often have a problem. It doesn’t seem like a problem. It is doing the right thing. But it is doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, with the wrong perspective. And that is the zinger of this parable. It is just as wrong. Notice the jealousy, notice the distancing from his brother, “that son of yours,” notice the name calling and shaming. This is disgusting and yet it is a mirror for so many of us.

³¹ “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² 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 then reminds him that he too got his so long ago, and it was a double portion. And in this sense, he too squandered it all, for it did not translate into the father’s DNA. Think about this: all this time, the father has been working on the older son’s behalf. It is all his. The father has given it all to him, (even if he still calls the shots). But this son who has it all doesn’t get it. He still wants more, more from his father when his father has given him everything.

Yes, the fact is this son too is a prodigal. He just doesn’t see himself that way. And as long as he doesn’t see himself that way, he will never come in out of the field, repent, and be celebrated. It is the same father, with the same offer, but the older son does not yet see the truth of the situation, just as the younger son did at the beginning of the story.

The younger son saw it all and demanded his share. The older son had it all and demanded a young goat. Is one any better than the other?

Indeed that is the point of the parable. As I said at the outset, we all know and instinctively understand the situation of the younger son. But we too often do not recognize the fact that “religious” people are just as lost, just as much prodigals. They too would be welcomed into their Father’s arms, if only they would repent and come in from the field to join the family celebration. Yes, this is the parable of the two prodigals.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will ALL see ourselves as prodigals, but just different types.
- 2) We will remember the character of our Father as we are separated from Him.
- 3) We will come back to Him humbly.
- 4) We will join the family celebration, no matter who it is that is being celebrated.

5) We will seek to pass on the Father's DNA to the next generation.