

The Parable Of The Lost Son

Most know this parable as the '*Parable of the Prodigal Son*' but it is better named '*The Parable of the Lost Son*' since it is clearly designed to do with the parables of '*The Lost Sheep*' [Luke 15:3-7] and '*The Lost Coin*' [Luke 15:8-10].

Some people have even called it '*The Parable of the Prodigal Father*' because of the father's willingness to forgive his errant son is so generous.

Who were these two sons? –

The first parable in this series had one of 100 getting lost, the second parable one in 10, but the parable we are studying has one out of two becoming lost. This sequence emphasises the magnitude of the lost son. **To lose half of your sons would be a tragedy and regaining half would be a greater cause of rejoicing.**

The younger son – There is no mention of a wife, so he would probably have been 18-20 years old. His youth is **not** emphasised, but younger sons may be more likely to be foolish and older sons more likely to look down on a younger brother.

Luke 15:12 [NIV] "*The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*"

Inheritances were normally given only when the father died.

The son's demand [not a request] for an early distribution was uncommon and frowned upon.

Early distribution of the estate normally meant that the father continued to receive the benefits of the estate as long as he lived, hence the father could kill the fatted calf without asking the older son who owned it.

The younger son did not only receive surplus property, it was part of the father's source of income.

Luke 15:13 [NIV] "*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 departure was but days later, his desire for his inheritance indicated he wanted to strike out on his own rather than be part of the family.

He was insulting the family as well as injuring it.

"A distant country" indicates a Gentile country.

"Squandered his wealth" not only did he waste the money, he sinned in the process.

Luke 15:14-16 [NIV] "*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.*"

According to the law given through Moses, pigs were unclean animals, [Leviticus 11:2-8; Deuteronomy 14:8]. This meant that pigs could **not** be eaten or used for sacrifices. To protect themselves from any defilement, Jews would not even touch pigs.

For a Jew to stoop to feeding pigs was a great humiliation, and for this young man to eat food that pigs had touched was to be degraded beyond belief.

The younger son had truly sunk to the depths.

“He longed to fill his stomach,” normally a servant would have been allowed to eat the carob-tree pods and receive some pay, *“but no-one gave him anything.”* He received nothing from his friends of his former life.

Luke 15:17 [NIV] *“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!’”*

This is the pivotal verse where the story takes a change of direction, he compares his situation as a hired man to those of his father *“food to spare”* compared to *“starving to death.”*

Luke 15:18 [NIV] *“I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”*

“Sinned against heaven” is a euphemism for God the Father, used perhaps because the father represents God in the story. Specific sins are not mentioned except by the older brother in **verse 30**.

“Against you” acknowledged to the family, wasting the family’s wealth.

Luke 15:19 [NIV] *“I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”*

This could be both in a legal and moral sense, he had no inheritance rights and his behaviour not up to family standards.

“Hired men” is Greek *“mishioi”* a contract labourer, farmhand **not** a *“dōulōs”* household bondservant as mentioned in **verse 22**.

Luke 15:20-24 [NIV] *“So he got up and went to his father. ‘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. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 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 and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” So they began to celebrate.’”*

“While he was still a long way off” implies that the father was continually watching for his return, this represents God’s feelings for all repentant sinners.

The kiss was perhaps a sign of forgiveness, [**2 Samuel 14:33**].

The returning son did **not** finish his prepared speech.

The best robe and ring both allude to promotion to authority, [**Genesis 41:42**].

Sandals were not worn by servants, only family members.

Fattened calf – meat was eaten primarily on Holy days and calves would be fattened for such Feasts, so perhaps the celebration here hints at a religious reconciliation, corresponding to the rejoicing of the lost sheep and coin.

“For this son of mine was dead,” – two possibilities, the father heard about the famine and not from his son so thought he was dead, or considered he had metaphorically died because he had become a

Gentile. Some Jews conducted funerals for children who married Gentiles, but this father does not seem to be the type to disown his son.

Luke 15:25-28 [NIV] *“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 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 fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.”*

So far this parable has been parallel to the first two parables, the lost being found and there being rejoicing.

Now the older son is introduced for an additional lesson in this parable.

The older son’s arrival on the scene is odd as he found out about the party by accident, perhaps that the older son was out of touch with the father, estranged in attitude or too addicted to work.

Again we have contrasts, the younger son decides to come home, the older son refused to enter. The younger son wants to be a servant, the older son resents being a servant. The younger son admits guilt, the older son insists on his innocence.

Luke 15:29-30 [NIV] *“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** your property with **prostitutes** comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’”*

The father went out in contrast to the older son’s unwillingness to come in.

Normally the older son had done all the father asked him but here the older son was disobedient and the use of the word “look” hints of disrespect, frustration and impatience.

The verb he used to describe their relationship was “*dōulēuo*” meaning servant, based on work not love. He had never disobeyed until now.

A goat was of lesser value to a calf. The older son felt unappreciated and unrewarded and his complaint suggests that he had a long-smouldering resentment.

“This son of yours” not “my brother.” “Squandered” literally devoured an ironic word to use for a hungry man. **“With prostitutes,” did the older brother really know this as a fact?**

All this man’s complaints centre on the physical.

Luke 15:31-32 [NIV] *“‘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 used for “son” a term of affection and reminder to him that he would inherit all of his possessions.

Older sons inherited twice as much as other sons because they had a responsibility to the family, but the older son was not willing to accept the responsibility, he simply wanted the property.

“*We had to celebrate*” rejoicing about the return of a lost person is **not** optional.

“*This brother of yours,*” the father was reminding the older son of his family responsibilities.

This parable has timeless messages about God the Father, He is always ready to be gracious towards repenting sinners, and rejoices at their repentance, [2 Peter 3:9].

The parable ends without revealing what either the younger or older son did next.

God the Father did His part, [**1 John 4:19**].

Did they respond to that love?

Do you?