

## THE WAITING FATHER

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Luke 15:11 to the end of the chapter, verse 32. “And he said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.” And he divided his living between them. Not many days later the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country and there he squandered his property in loose living. When he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his field to feed swine. He would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough to spare? But I perish here 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. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” He arose and came to his father. While he was yet a distance his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am 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 on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and make merry. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.” And they began to make merry. Now his elder son was in the field and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this meant. He said to him, “Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he received him safe and sound.” But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him but he answered his father, “Lo, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a kid that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came who has devoured your living with harlots you killed for him the fatted calf.” And he said to him, “Son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad for this, your brother, was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.”””

This parable called the gospel within the gospel has been called the world’s greatest short story. It has an O Henry like twist at the end. It occurs in a chapter where Jesus is describing three things that are lost. A sheep that is lost, a coin that is lost, and a son that is lost.

The sheep has become lost through carelessness. The coin has been lost by no evident reason. The son has been lost by his deliberate choice. All three things – two things and a person – which has been lost describe to us the way people become lost from the father’s care. Some carelessly and recklessly stray away. Some become lost for no apparent reason. But many become lost through deliberate choice.

So that in this story we find reflected what Paul says in his letter, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” In this short story of Jesus we often focus in on the story of the prodigal or sometimes the story of the elder. But the primary focus of this story is actually on the father. So as we look at this parable today I want us to look at it by understanding who is the father that the Lord is describing to us. For when Jesus came into life he represented the father. And it is from him that we learn something about the character of God. Especially do we learn it in this story.

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The first quality that we see in the father is that he allows his children to make their own decisions. He allows the son to take of his property. In biblical days one did not have a great deal of cash currency floating around. Stocks and bonds were not yet. Checking accounts had not yet come into existence. One's property was tied up in his physical assets. So that when the son came and said, "Father, I want my share of the property before you die, I want it now," it meant that if the father was to give it to him he had to liquidate some of his holdings. The story tells us there were two sons. According to the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 21:17 it was the law that the elder son received two times as much as the younger son. So what it meant the father would have had to have liquidated at least one third of his holdings. Someone would have had to have gone and surveyed his land and sold off one third of his share. Someone would have gone out and counted the cattle and the sheep and sold them off in order to provide the son some kind of coinage that he could take as liquid currency and go into the far country. All of this would take time. All of this shows the deliberateness of the younger son's decision. It also shows us something about the father. The father does not say no to anyone of his children who wishes to leave his house, to leave his family. He's created us with that right to say yes or to say no. If a son wants to try things his own way the father will give the son what the son perceives to be his needs. So therefore the son took the life which the father had given him and he took the assets which the father had given him and went away into a far country.

It's striking to note the son had no assets of his own. Just as we as children of the father have no assets of our own. We do not own our life. We do not own in a true sense the things, which have. We do not in a true sense own the personality, which we have. All has come as a gift from the father. But the father is allowing us to choose to spend it in anyway we wish. We can spend our personality, we can spend our lives, we can spend our assets, we can spend our time as we will. In the love of the father he allows that choice. That's why sometimes it's so very difficult to pray for people who do not know the Lord. You recognize as you pray for them that the Father will not allow the Holy Spirit to lock a hammer-lock on them to get them to cry uncle. True the Holy Spirit will create circumstances, which will bring that person to a greater understanding of his need. But the Holy Spirit will not force anyone to own Jesus as savior and Lord. Or come back and be a part of the Father's house and have the father's name.

That quality of the father stands out in this story. You have a Father who allows you freedom.

A second thing which stands out in reference to the father however in this story is the father is seen as a suffering father.

He hurts over our decisions. He hurts over our wrong decisions. This younger son who is away in a far country. A far country doesn't have to be far in terms of miles. It could have been just five or ten miles down the road and been a far country. A far country is any place we're at where the father is not. That's a far country.

This younger son was there. This young son whom he had once held in his arms, whom he had taught to take his first step, whom he had heard speak his first word, with whom he had prayed and played. This young boy had grown up and become an outstanding looking young man and was now away. The father's heart hurt because he knew that his son was not living life as it would be lived and that he was wasting his life rather than gaining his life.

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This story of the suffering father tells us that some children turn out bad no matter how good their father is. There's no doubt in this story but that the father represents God and yet his younger son goes astray.

This father suffered. He suffered the loss of three things. He suffered the loss of money. He suffered the loss of reputation. There would have been those who said, What kind of a father are you to have a son like that? But most importantly and the keenest sense of loss was the fact that the father had lost his son. What does it matter if one loses his money but has his son. What does it matter if one loses his reputation but has his son. But if one has truly loved and has lost his child then indeed one has lost everything.

God feels that way toward us. Even in the Old Testament we see that kind of love that God has toward the nation of Israel. One of the most moving passages in all the Old Testament is Hosea 11. We have the Old Testament equivalent of this story of Jesus. The prophet is describing Israel as a child and God as the Father. Israel is a prodigal away from God. Hosea writes, "When Israel was a child I loved him. Out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them the more they went from me. They kept sacrificing to Baal's and burning incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took him up in my arms. They did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion." If I were translating that in modern idiom I would say, God pulled his child in the little red wagon down the sidewalk. I led them with cords of compassion but they did not know it was I who healed them. I became as one who eases the guilt on their jaws. I bent down and fed them. But my people are bent from turning from me." Then the prophet on behalf of God says "How can I give you up O Ephraim? How can I let you go O Israel?" That's what God feels towards every person. How could I let you go? How could I give you up?

How strange it is that sometimes we feel that God doesn't love us, that God doesn't want us, that God can't forgive us, that he doesn't care. Then compare that to what the Old and New Testament is saying about God's love for us: How could I ever give you up? How could I let you go? The father suffers when we're away from his care and his love.

The Father allows us to make our own decisions the father suffers in our wrong decisions.

A third quality of the father is he waits for us to come home.

Sometimes he must wait until we have an energy crisis of our own. The prodigal ran out of money and therefore he ran out of friends in his hedonistic playboy like environment friends and money go hand in hand. When one runs out of the first, he runs out of the second. Therefore he ran out of good times. All of this because initially he had ran away from the father. He made the mistake of trying to spend the father's resources without the father. He tried to spend his life without the father. He tried to spend his money without the father. He tried to spend his personality without the father.

Whenever we use the talents and the assets which God has given to us independent of the Father we necessarily as a result live life wrongly.

But this young man comes to himself. In fact this is one of the geniuses of the story. That the father waits. Waiting for what? Waiting for the son to come to himself. That's a striking phrase that Jesus uses – he came to himself. The inference from that is no person can truly be

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themselves until they come to the father. That the prodigal son out in the pigpen or even when he was out eating and drinking and making merry as far as the world was concerned. He was not truly himself. No one can truly be themselves as long as they're away from the father. So you really find yourself, when you find yourself in God.

He came to himself. It began with a decision on his part. There was no coaxing. There was no manipulation of him by someone who was trying to get him to make a decision he didn't want to make. The conversions that stick are the conversions that the person says from the depth of his heart, I must come to myself. This is what I must be. The coming is voluntary and free.

When he makes the intention then he follows it with action. He not only comes to himself but he arises and comes to his father. He says "I will arise," and he backs it up by action. He does arise and he goes to his father's house and he confesses.

The father's waiting had paid off. The fact that the father embraces him with such wide open arms indicate the fatherly love of God toward every human individual, no matter what we have done or where we have been. God waits for us with open arms to come home to him.

This brings us to the fourth quality of the father that shines in the story. It's a quality of the father, which we may describe as forgiveness. A word which we use a lot but I'm not sure we always put it into practice or always understand it. It especially comes out in how this father treated his son. When the son comes home the father does not ask the son, What have you lost? He does not say to him, "We must have an inventory, the assets, which I gave to you. What did you do with them? He does not ask him to recite the experiences, which he had. He does not put him on probation and say, You're home, son, that's fine. You really hurt me badly though. I must keep you kind of in the servant's quarters for a year. At the end of the year if you check out ok and you've been good then I'll give a party for you. That's about all I can do for you. You've got everything anyway. I'll give you a party."

God doesn't put us on probation when we come to him. It's a full, warm, openhearted acceptance. We are received. God doesn't think of what we've squandered. God doesn't think of what we lost. He thinks of the fact that we're home. And he cares. Isn't the love of God something wonderful? We talk about it. We read about it in the scripture. We hear it from time to time. But we drift anew from the truth that Jesus has spoken. To hear this story for the first time, to have been in that audience when the Lord initially spoke it, and so set the world on its ear by giving it an understanding of God it never really had before. God loves his children.

Lincoln when he was asked how he would treat rebellious southerners after the civil war replied, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." So when the son comes home the father orders a celebration, just like he orders it for us when we come home. Jesus had prefaced this story with 15:10 "I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The words "rejoice" and "joy" consistently occur in these stories as well as the word "merry" which occurs three times in the setting of the prodigal.

Why does the father give a party? The two third remaining of what he had all belong to the elder son. He couldn't give the younger son any more of his assets because that had all now been distributed. The only thing he could do to really express his joy was to give a party. That he could do. He could dress him in a good suit, put a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet and he could kill for him the fatted calf and hold a party.

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Why would God want to throw a party for someone who comes home? Why not treat it as an everyday transaction? Why not just see it as another event in the course of events, which happen to us in life? Treat the event calmly and matter of factly. Why does he throw a party?

As I look for an answer I find it not only in the father's great joy. But I find it perhaps also that the try of the two brothers cuts off at the moment they're at the party. We never know whether the elder brother came in and participated in the party. And we never know if the younger son who came home was ever again tempted to go out and live the kind of life that he had just returned from. But if he ever were tempted to go out and live it again this party would be a fixation in his memory to show him, There's no comparison between what you had and what the father gives you. Know that what the father has given you is an outpouring of his heart and his joy. So that you'll ever be really tested to go back to the husks, back to the environment from which you just came. Know the life the father has set before you, the cleansing which he gives to you that the old life has had it for you and the new life is begun.

So the Lord throws a party. In a very individualized sense now of course the party which the father throws us when we come to him is that tremendous feeling of cleanness and rightness and joy that comes in our life when we recognize and acknowledge Jesus and confess our sins. But we must never forget that Jesus most frequently talks of heaven as a party, a joyous occasion. So this word as well reaches into the future and suggests to us that the inner party which we're already having because Christ has come, is to be followed by great bash in the heavens

The father loves his children, he receives them with forgiveness when they truly come with a sincere heart.

The story indicated has a O Henry like twist. The elder brother is the surprise in the story. He is the manifestation of the principle that you can be lost and never outwardly rebel. You can be lost and never leave the ecclesiastical structure. You can be lost and never leave the environment of the church.

The elder brother looked at the returning prodigal as not his brother, but rather defiantly calls him to his father, this son of yours. In the story the father must point out to the older brother, "This is your brother."

This elder brother is one of the most unloving figures in all of scripture. He represents every religious person whose relationship with God has grown cold and dreary and doesn't care any more about people being found. He's an individual who never misses a beat in life when someone else is suffering and away from the father's heart. He lived in the father's house but he doesn't share the father's heart. And he does not have tears of joy when the younger son returns.

Of course as we've looked at the context of Luke, the historical context of this story, Jesus is being received by sinners and tax collectors and prostitute. He is being rejected by the scribes and the Pharisees and the hypocrites. He's comparing these two groups of people to the younger son who was finding life and who was being forgiven to the older one who had been in God's house and knew God's laws but was upset because those who were freshly coming were finding forgiveness in the fact that God's giving a party.

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We do not know if the elder brother went on to come into the feast and repented of his prodigalness of heart. We do not know the eventual outcome of the son himself. The point of the story is to focus us in on the love of the father.

There's another parable, which has been recently coned which I ran across which kind of puts a unique ending to this story. It puts the story in the context of the total finished work of Christ, in his death and resurrection.

The story goes something like this. God had three sons. Two of them were sons of earth, children of his creation. The other a son in heaven. The youngest son on earth forgot his true home and who through pride of flesh and into shame. The older son on earth began to despise his brother and so grew hard through pride of mind. The son in heaven lived always in his father's joy. But a shadow fell on both when they thought of father's children on earth. So the son took flesh and walked on earth. He found the younger prodigal, ate his husks and shared his shame. But the prodigal was deaf. No brother of mine he cried and God is only a name. So the son of God then found the elder prodigal who was in church. But he was hard ad was hurt. Why should you seek my brother? he asked bitterly. For he is a wastrel. You are no better than he. Then befell the most cruel thing earth has ever known. The two prodigals killed the son of God for his light was tame to their afflicted eyes. In the hate that yearning can bring they threw him on a cross. But he prayed for them and he died. The younger prodigal said, I would return to God if I had not killed his only begotten son. The older prodigal said, I never knew my lovelessness until I saw his love. But I have killed him.

Then the son arose from the dead. There's room in the father's house for the elder prodigal who stayed at home and the younger prodigal who went into a far country. Both are embraced by the father's love. And both are deeply wanted by the father.

Our Father, we call upon you in that way because it is your son who taught us to pray to you as our Father. Father, we are people who are in pursuit to grow. We want to be better people. We want to learn how to be more intelligent. We want to learn how to be more gracious. We want to learn how to have more personality. We want to learn how to be more skillful. We want to learn how to be better parent if we're parents or how to be better children if we're children how to be a better husband or wife if that is our category. How to be better in the call of God to be single. We want to increase in wisdom and in strength. We want to better our position, better our income. Better our walk with you. So a stream of books and sermons and advice from friends and counsel of others comes to us teaching us how to be better. But in all of our grasping of these things which are good and helpful, there are times when you through your word have us fall back upon the rock where we really do stand. That is your great love for us. We just pause for a few moments and not so much learn anything new so much as to be reminded that you really have a heart for us. That you went all the way for us to the cross. That you care with a love that cannot be measured. The measurement of the yardstick, the measurement of the scale, the measurement of the computer, your love is unlimited. Your love is not focused upon us as amass of human beings. But we all find ourselves individually in your presence just as these two brothers were individually unknown and recognized by you. So we just take this moment to sit back and pause and reflect and understand and give thanks that you loved the world so much that you gave your only Son for us. That we who believe in you should never perish but that we should be appointed to have vestal robes at the joyous banquet occasion at the wedding of your Son to us your church, his bride. What a joy it is to serve you, to be loved by you.

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And to know that your love for us embraces us forever and ever and ever. World without end. Through Jesus our Lord we give thanks for this. Amen.