

The Parable of the Lost Sons

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Date: 25 May 2025

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[0 : 0 0] On page 1048 you'll find our reading this morning in the Gospel according to St. Luke, chapter 15. Luke, chapter 15. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus.

! But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. And now at verse 11.

Jesus continued, There was a man who had two sons. The younger 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 younger 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.

[1 : 1 5] When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hard 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 have sinned against heaven and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hard servants. 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 round 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.

[2 : 2 3] Meanwhile, the elder 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 elder 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 your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. 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. This is the word of the Lord.

[3 : 36] Thanks. Thanks, Ruth, for reading that. Good morning, St Silas. If we've not met before, I'm Martin Ayres, the lead pastor here.

And we're going to be looking together at that portion of the Bible, Luke chapter 15. So it would be a great help to me if you could keep it open, page 1048, as you look at that. And as always, inside the notice sheet, you'll find an outline as well that would help you as we look at this together.

Let's ask for God's help. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is living and active. And we ask that your Holy Spirit, the spirit of light and truth, will transform us, that he will give us ears to hear and stir our hearts to respond rightly to you.

For we ask in the name of your Son, the Lord Jesus. Amen. Well, nine years ago, when I came to St Silas to be the pastor here, one of the things we did in the early months together was we brought the whole church together midweek for five weeks to look together just at this one parable.

And we did that because this story that Jesus told encapsulates so much about the Christian faith. It's been called the gospel within the gospel for at least a thousand years.

[5 : 00] So if you're here this morning and this is a follow-up to Holiday Club because your children were there at that and you've come back, you're in the right place. This is a great thing to look at together.

If you're here just making up your mind about Jesus, there isn't really a more important Bible passage than this one to look at. And for those of us who are already Christians, however familiar these truths are, we can all have a tendency to drift, to become like one of these two sons in how we think about God and in how we relate to Him.

And it's a very healthy thing for every Christian to reset ourselves from time to time with this story. The setting is at the start of the chapter where we find that there's a surprising audience listening to Jesus in verse 1.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. Now the Bible makes clear for us that every single one of us is a sinner.

But here the word is being used in the way that the religious people would have used it at the time as a pejorative term, a word you use to look down on other people because their direction of life was so obviously away from God.

[6 : 21] So if you were someone doing your best for God, you would think to yourself, they are the sinners and not you. Who would think like that?

The people of verse 2. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, that is the Bible, the law there, the law of God. So the religious leaders muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

So Jesus tells three stories about being lost and found. And in the third story, we have a father and he represents God the Father.

And we have a younger son and he represents the rebellious types, the irreligious who are coming to Jesus. And then we have an older son in the story and he represents the religious guys of verse 2, the moralists, the guys who think they're on the right track.

And we're going to see there are two twists in the tale and then there are two ways to be lost and then there are two steps to coming back home. So first of all, there are two twists in the tale.

[7 : 34] We're going to look at the story together and there are five scenes and scene one is home. Let's pick things up at verse 11. There was a man who had two sons.

The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them. So the story there you can see starts off at home.

And home is very important to us. You get used to a place, the buildings, the people, the weather. I've got a friend who is an ambassador now and he has to move jobs every few years to live in different embassies.

And whenever he's moved to a new city, it's very important to him and his family that one of the first things they unpack are the pictures to put on the walls so that very quickly this new place will start to feel like home.

In this parable, Jesus is saying that for every one of us, our true home is to be with God. But at this stage in the story, the younger son wants to leave.

[8 : 43] This is a culture where people lived in a very close relationship to the land, the land God had given to them. So when the son wants to have his inheritance now and go to a distant place, what's he saying?

To his father, he's saying, I wish you were dead. I'd rather have your stuff, the stuff that will one day be mine, than that you were still here and I was with you.

Why? Being under your fatherly oversight is limiting my ability to enjoy my life. How should the father respond?

How should he feel? Hurt? Betrayed? Angry? Surely he'd be right to feel any of those things.

But remarkably, he is willing to sell off some of the estate. I think it would be a third of it for the younger son to give him the inheritance now.

[9 : 45] And in verse 12, he grants his younger son his wish. And this is Jesus' picture for the way that we've treated God. We want the good things that he gives us, but we don't want him around because we think that his oversight will limit our enjoyment of life.

And so we leave. We leave God behind. Some of us are very vocal in the way that we reject God. But for many of us, when it comes to God, we've just slipped out the back door.

We don't center our lives around him. And if God is the source of everything good in our world, what we're doing is we're enjoying the inheritance, we're enjoying the good things from him, you know, the holidays, the opportunities, the friendships, the home, the sport, the music, the scenery, and we're not acknowledging him as the giver.

So we follow the younger son into scene two, the distant country. Not long after that, Jesus says, the younger son got together, all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

It's going well at first for the son. As he throws off the shackles of his home life in exchange for plenty of wine, women, and song. Like we might picture a young man growing up on Harris, or South Uist, and coming to Glasgow with money to burn, and enjoying the most hedonistic city life, and thinking, at last, this is real life.

[11 : 24] This is freedom. But then the money runs out. Verse 14. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

He hires himself out as a pig feeder, and you can imagine the first audience, who were a Jewish audience, for whom pigs were unclean, they would never eat pork, and here they are squirming with disgust, as Jesus says, rock bottom for this man, was that now, he even envies the pigs, because he wishes that what he was feeding them, he could eat himself, to fill his empty stomach.

And at that point, the sun starts weighing up, just how bad things have got for him, away from home. So that's the next scene. I've called it the turn. And Jesus brings us, for the first time in the story, right into what the sun is thinking, in verse 17.

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.

So he decides to write a coming home speech, and he sets off back to the estate. And on the way, you can imagine him rehearsing the speech.

[12 : 48] He knows that he shamed his dad in what he asked for, and now it's worse, because he's squandered what his father gave to him. But he's got this groveling speech ready.

It's worth a shot. Verse 18, he's going to say, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son, but just make me like one of your hired servants.

And he sets off back home. So we come to scene four on the roadside, and we picture the son trudging along, exhausted, emaciated, in rags, finally reaching the dusty road that was once familiar to him, rehearsing his speech.

And then we get the first twist in the story. As the son looks up, and in the distance, he sees a flicker. And he realizes that somebody is running towards him in verse 20.

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.

[14 : 11] So we get the impression that the father has been standing watch. Perhaps every day since the son left. Eyes on the horizon, longing for another sight of the son he's lost.

And so when he sees him, he runs out to meet his son. He can't wait any longer. I'm told that respectable Middle Eastern men never ran for anyone.

Children ran, maybe women ran, but not respectable men. And yet this is the father who was once shamed by his son's rejection. Now with reckless abandon, compelled by relief and love, he runs out to welcome the prodigal son back home.

And before the son can request the zero hours contract he was planning on asking for, his father cuts him off and mid-speech he interrupts and says, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. What's he saying? He's saying, cover my son's shame with my honor. Cover his rags with my robe.

[15 : 26] And in verse 24 he announces a celebration as he declares, this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

And they start this great feast. Here then is Jesus' picture of God and his posture towards you when you turn back to him.

I think of an older lady here, Moira Campbell, who lived across the road looking at this parable at those midweek gatherings we had and saying to me, come here, I need to speak to you.

And with tears in her eyes saying to me, is Jesus really saying here that after all that I've done, after years away from him, all I have to do is turn back to God and he'll accept me like this.

And I was so privileged to be able to have that conversation because it reminded me that it really is a wonderful thing to become a Christian. And the story could end there, but there's this second twist in the tale because it's outside the feast that we find the older son who has come in from a day working hard in the fields.

[16 : 46] And as he comes near, he hears the music and the dancing and he didn't know about a party. And so he calls someone over and he says, what's all this about? And he hears that his brother who'd squandered all the money has come home sorry and his father's let him in.

And the last straw for the older brother is this business with the fattened calf. Did you notice that? It comes up in verse 23 that he's brought the fattened calf and killed it.

The fattened calf, you see, was the most lavish feast you could have. It was how you'd celebrate if Scotland won the Euros. You'd feed the whole village with the fattened calf.

And the older brother is adamant that he's not joining this party. When his dad goes out to plead with him, you hear the fury in him.

And just think about what he thinks of his father, what's been building up inside him with what he says in verse 29. He says, All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

[17 : 52] 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.

Do you see what he's saying? It's like saying, Dad, while my brother walked out, I stayed at home and I got five A's in my hires and you didn't even give me a burger and chips to celebrate with my friends.

No Pisano's trip for me. Your other son, he bogged off, dropped out, spent your second mortgage in strip joints. Now he comes back and you're taking us all to Six by Nico.

No thanks, Dad. I've caned it for you and you've given me nothing in return. And so the father appeals to the older son, verse 31, and he's saying, Rejoice like I do in what's happened.

But the verse 31, My son, you are always with me, but we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours, notice he was this son of yours.

[19 : 02] But the father says, No, this brother of yours, he was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And then the curtain falls on the story and we're just left wondering, What's the older son going to do now?

That's the second twist. When you first hear the parable, and I'd heard it for many years before I'd seen that, I always thought the contrast in the parable was between the two sons.

That one is the bad kid who runs away and the other one, I thought, was the good kid who stayed home. But the real contrast in the story is between the father and the older son.

You see that? In their attitude towards the younger son when he comes back. And the younger son and the older son actually have a lot more in common than you might think.

So that's our second point. There are two ways to be lost. At the end of the story, we realize that the older son is as lost as the younger son was.

[20 : 06] The younger son gives us a picture of the libertine, the rebellious lifestyle, the person who builds their identity on saying, I don't want God or anyone else's rules and restrictions in my life.

I get to make up my own mind what's right and wrong. That's the younger son. But the older son gives us a picture of the moralistic life, the religious life, the person who builds their identity on saying, no, I'm a good person.

I won't be like those people. I will conform. I will be upstanding and morally acceptable, the best version of myself that I can be. And Jesus is saying, both those options leave you spiritually lost.

And the shock for us is that we look at the younger son running away from the father as a picture of how we might mistreat God. And we say, yep, that's sin.

I get it. Running from God. But Jesus here is redefining sin for us. He says, sin is alienation from the father.

[21 : 17] And you can stay home with God and be alienated from him. Both sons actually had the same problem. Neither of them really knows the father.

The younger son, he thought that the father was in the way of him getting what he wanted from life. And so he chose to run away. But the older son thought that he could use the father to get what he wanted from life by keeping his father's rules and being rewarded.

He thought that he was a slave to his father. And this older son is a picture for us of moralistic religion. In his mind, him and his father had a deal.

If I work for you, if I keep your commands, you will give me what I want. That's how the religious people of verse 2 are treating God.

God, that's what Jesus is saying to them with the story. And today you can find people in churches who think like that towards God. They look the part, they look as though they're at home with God.

[22 : 27] But any of us can turn being good for God into a transaction to keep God at arm's length. I'll do this and this and this so that I stay in your good books, God, and you reward me.

How can we tell if we've become an older brother? Well, one way would be that we start to look down on other people. They're the sinners, but that's a category I don't belong to.

Another way that we can spot the heart of an older brother in us would be if something goes wrong in our life. We're busy serving Jesus and then something happens in our life that is profoundly what we didn't want to happen and what we find welling up inside us is deep resentment towards God.

We think something like, all these years I've served you. After all that, how could you let something like this happen to me? Because we thought to ourselves, me and God, we had a deal.

That's the older brother. Two ways to be lost and it's spiritually very dangerous to be an older brother. Jesus says, by the end of the story, the older brother is outside the party and it's his good deeds that keep him outside, that prevent him from being willing to come in.

[23 : 58] So it's good to ask yourself, which son do you most identify with? Do you feel more like the younger son that you know that you've put distance between you and God?

Or do you feel more like the older son that you've been striving to be good for God but really your view of him is that he is a hard taskmaster? In either case, the Bible urges us here, the parable urges us, come home to what God is really like.

And that's our third point this morning, two steps to finding our way home. God invites each one of us to come home to him and the story gives us two truths that if we grasp them can move us to want to do that.

The first is the initiating love of the father. For the younger son, it was in verse 20, that while his son was still a long way off, his father saw him and filled with compassion for him, he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

But then when the older son shames his father by staying outside the party his father is throwing, again, the father goes out to him as well to plead with him to come in.

[25 : 23] Some people say they don't like the Bible's picture of God as a father because they've had a disappointing experience in their own life of their father. But Jesus is saying here God is a father and he may just be a father like none you've ever known.

He's a father of emotional abandon, a father of unbridled grace, looking out to the horizon for you, longing to welcome you into his embrace and to cover your shame with his honor.

And when anyone turns back to him he rejoices with unconstrained joy. That theme binds all three stories together in this chapter. Jesus says, you want to know what my father is like?

Picture a shepherd with a hundred sheep. He loses one, he searches and when he finds it what does he do? He calls his friends and neighbors together. He says, rejoice with me for what I found that was lost.

And then he says, imagine a woman and she has ten silver coins and she loses one. So that's ten percent of her wealth and she sweeps and she searches and when she finds it she calls her friends and neighbors together and she says, rejoice with me.

[26 : 41] Come celebrate with me for what I found that was lost. And then Jesus intensifies it as we move from losing one of a hundred sheep to one of ten silver coins to then just, to one of just two sons.

In other words, to be a Christian is to experience a relationship of extraordinary generosity and love. Generosity and love.

And for us, becoming a Christian is a choice that we make. We all face that choice to choose to turn back. But when anyone does that, from God's perspective he celebrates like the shepherd, the woman, the father, that something so precious to him that was lost has now been found.

So that the application for us, from this parable, for us as a church, as a community of believers, is that our culture would be one of joyful welcome.

We all know that we were once like the younger son who'd run from God and the father has welcomed us home and so now when anyone else chooses to turn back to God, whatever they've done, we would share in the father's joy.

[28 : 06] The second step to coming home is to know that there is another brother who's not in Jesus' story here, but who saw that we were lost and came on a costly mission to find us.

Just a few chapters later in Luke chapter 19, Jesus says that he has come on a mission to seek and to save the lost. In other words, each one of us was like the younger brother who ran from the father's love, but Jesus was the true son, the faithful son in his father's heavenly home and he came into the world to find us and bring us back.

James Patterson was an American soldier who went to fight in Vietnam. His plane was shot down and he successfully ejected from the plane but was lost. His brother, George Patterson, had returned home from fighting and he went back to Vietnam to look for his brother who was lost.

He went behind enemy lines. Vietnamese soldiers saw him but they knew who he was. They knew he's the soldier who means no harm.

He's just searching tirelessly for the brother he's lost. He wants to bring him home. Well, Jesus left his father's home to look for us knowing it would cost him everything to bring us back.

[29 : 40] Sin is alienation from God and Jesus went to the cross where he experienced that alienation where he went through what it is to be truly lost forsaken by God so that he could open for us the way back home.

And I tell that story of James Patterson and his brother George going to look for him you might be wondering well did he find him? I think the question that the parable makes us want to ask ourselves is has Jesus found me?

Because he's come looking and now Jesus is risen ascended he's gone back home to his father and whenever any of us turns back he shares in his father's joy.

So we're going to respond to God's word together in a moment Greg's going to come up and he's going to lead a song that he wrote just to give us time to reflect on God's word in this parable I asked him to come and play that for us so we'll have a time of reflection and you might be someone here who knows that you're not at home with God today and that you'd like to take that step of coming back to him today will be a great day to do that and so I've printed a prayer on the sheets inside the sheets there that you could pray on your own just to talk to God while you're listening to this song after we've heard that song Tito will invite us all to stand and we'll sing in response to God's word but before we hear that song let me lead us all in a prayer Father God we praise you for your generosity your grace your initiating love we praise you for the Lord Jesus who when we were lost came to seek us and to save us

I pray that the deep truths of this parable will land with each of us here and impress us where we have put distance between ourselves and you would we see this morning your readiness to welcome us home where we've become like the older brother would we turn from that today and relate to you as our good and generous Father again and for all of us would we in our church family share in your joy over every sinner who repents for we ask in Jesus name Amen Amen Thank you.