

The Parable of the Lost Sons

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Jesus once told a parable about a father and his two sons. The parable was given in response to a group of Pharisees. They had objected to Jesus' association with sinners (Luke 15:1-2). The parable is familiar to most people. The story radically redefined common conceptions of how we typically understand ourselves and our relationship with God.

The Parable Described

Luke 15:11-32

A father had two sons. One day, the younger son came to the father and asked for his share of his father's estate. Surprisingly, the father gave the younger son what he demanded. The younger son left home and wasted his inheritance. He lived a grossly immoral life and lost everything.

The younger son finally hit rock bottom. He decided to go home. He devised a plan. He would apologize to his father and propose becoming a hired servant on his father's estate. Essentially, the younger son would propose a restitution plan to repay his father. Resolved, the younger son returned home.

When the father saw his younger son approaching home, he ran to greet him. The son apologized and presented his restitution plan. However, the father did not so much as acknowledge the son's plan. Instead, the father called for his youngest son to be given a robe and a signet ring. The highly valued fattened calf was slaughtered and an extravagant celebration was given in his youngest son's honor.

While the celebration was commencing, the older brother came in from work. When he learned what was going on, he became indignant. He refused to go into the feast. His father left the celebration and pled with his oldest son to join the festivities.

The oldest son was furious that his father was wasting what he perceived as his inheritance on a party for his younger brother. The oldest son defended his anger with his faithfulness to his father. He had never left home. He had always obeyed his father. His father had never given a banquet in his honor.

The father tried to persuade his older son by assuring him that his inheritance was intact. He said that a celebration for his younger brother was appropriate. Then, the parable ends without resolution. A cliff-hanger! Jesus forces us to analyze his story.

Radical Redefinitions

This parable was directed to a gathering of Pharisees. Everything about this parable would have been considered radical and disturbing. Jesus upended the conventional thinking of His time. Perhaps it is time that Jesus upend the conventional thinking of our time. Notice the radical redefinitions in Jesus' parable.

1. Jesus redefines God. Jesus presents God as a loving father. This is unusual. In Jesus' culture, fathers were viewed as austere, reverential patriarchs. Yet, the father who Jesus presents runs and pleads. Children run, not fathers. Fathers command. They do not passionately plead with their children; yet, the father in Jesus' parable does exactly this.

2. Jesus redefines sin. The younger son represents "traditional sin." The sin of the younger brother is obvious. He made selfish demands. He was wasteful and ungrateful. He fornicated. The older brother, though, represents a "new," less obvious way of sinning. He was obedient, but for selfish reasons. He may have done the right things, but not for the right reason. While the sons were different, they were both sinners.

3. Jesus redefines salvation. The default setting of the human heart is self-justification. Yet, self-justification does not work. We cannot validate our sinful actions. Nor can we leverage ourselves into a relationship with God. In this parable, Jesus shows us what we need to be saved.

Both sons wanted the wealth and status of their father, but neither wanted the father. They tried getting what they wanted in different ways, but both were profoundly flawed. This shows us two fundamentally different, unsound ways we attempt to connect with God: 1.) Self-discovery. 2). Moral conformity.

Some people try to connect to God through self-discovery. Like the younger son, they will become self-indulgent and grossly immoral. When they realize they have gone wrong, they will contrive a plan to earn their way back to God.

Others try to connect to God through moral conformity. Like the older son, they will find comfort in their relationship with God because they don't sin; they worship regularly; they give money to the church; they help their neighbors. Their piety produces a corrosive sense of entitlement. This parable conveys what we need to receive salvation and enjoy a relationship with God, our father.

First, we need the initiating love of the Father. The father ran to his younger son. The father left the celebration and went out to plead with his older son. The Bible declares that we love God because He FIRST loved us (1 John 4:19). He loved and gave us His Son to pay for our sins. Gracious love leads to repentance. Without it, we cannot be saved.

Second, Jesus shows us that we must repent of something more than just our sins. We must repent of our motives for doing good. This is a radical way of thinking. The older brother thought he was entitled to his father's estate because of the good he had done. He did not have

a list of sins like his younger brother. But, his good was motivated by greed. With Jesus, the motives of our hearts matter.

Third, Jesus shows us that we must be moved by what it costs to bring us home. In this parable, had the older brother been an honorable older brother, he would have gone looking for his younger brother. He would have spared no expense to bring his brother home. But, this older brother did not do this.

Thankfully, we have a good, loving older brother (Mark 3:35). He left His home to search for us. He spared no expense to bring us home. He shed His blood. He gave us his life. He paid the price. By His love and grace, we can be moved to come home and take our place at His table.

Conclusion

Jesus dismantled what people commonly thought about God, sin, and salvation. This parable would have been shocking to the Pharisees who first heard it. Jesus was teaching that God does not want “good” people. He wants new people.

On the surface, these brothers looked as different as day and night. Deep down, they were the same. They were lost. They were sinners. Their only hope was the loving grace of their father and genuine repentance. And like them, this is our only hope.