



The Lost Son

In the name of him who came to seek and to save the lost, dear friends in Christ: The parable of the prodigal son is certainly one of the best-known and most cherished of the teachings of our Lord Jesus. But some have suggested that it's misnamed. They contend that a story like this should be titled for its most remarkable and memorable character – the one who provides the action that makes up the substance and principle point of the story. That character isn't the prodigal son. There isn't anything remarkable about his part of the story. Sadly, his is all too common a story: a pampered and rebellious youth who has never had any real responsibility – not even for himself – who chafes under the discipline of his parents, and who wants to strike out on his own, to be free to do *what* he wants, *when* he wants, *with whomever* he wants – *but* who can't afford to do it on his own, and so begs or borrows whatever he can from the very folks he thinks he wants to be free of. Then, having received it, he gets as far as he can from their "oppressive" supervision in order to live what he imagines is his dream. The wild passions of youth, inexperience, and irresponsibility soon run their course until forced to a grinding halt by the sudden and foolishly unexpected evaporation of all resources. This is almost always followed by a reluctant and rather shamefaced retreat to the shelter and security of home. It's a familiar story. If you doubt it, all you have to do is visit any of our nation's college campuses during the fall term to see it playing out in the lives of somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the incoming freshman.

The truly remarkable character in the story, the one who does what's so surprising and who makes the story so memorable is the father of the rebellious and wasteful boy. Here we have a man who has done his level best to raise his son in a loving and caring way, who applied the necessary discipline to help develop the boy into a respectable man; but who despite his best intentions has been disappointed by his son's hostile, stubborn spirit, and deeply wounded by his ingratitude. Nevertheless this is a father whose heart aches for the return of his lost child; who spends much of the day watching the approaching road in the hope that this just might be the day he'll come back. He's a father who, even at a great distance, recognizes the silhouette and familiar gait of his beloved son, even though he's barely a shadow of his former self: starved, unkempt, and dressed in rags. This is a father who leaps to his feet in joy and runs to meet his wayward child, even while shouting orders to roll out the red carpet and prepare a feast of celebration; a father who receives his lost son with an embrace and a kiss and orders him to be clothed in finery; a father who, having been badly burned, still risks giving his wanton son the signet ring which carries with it the authority of a co-owner of the estate. In all these things, it's the father's performance that is truly astonishing. And for all of these reasons, some people have said that the story should better be called the parable of the forgiving father, or perhaps the parable of the father's love. He's the one whose actions make the story.

But I doubt that the idea will ever catch on. In the minds of most Christians, this will always be the parable of the prodigal son. And the reason for that is because he is the character with whom we most readily identify. Every person who has ever come to the crash at the end of sin's wild ride and has thus been forced to do the soul searching that leads to repentance recognizes that the prodigal son is "me". We all know that *I* am the one who takes the inheritance from the Father and squanders it away in fruitless and unwholesome living; that *I'm* the one who reaps the bitter harvest of what I've sown; and *I'm* the one who comes crawling back time and again to the Father I've so deeply offended to beg for his mercy.

And this is the picture our Heavenly Father wants us to have in mind every time we go to him to confess our sins. Too often when we gather here for worship and begin our service with the confession of sin, we think of it as mere liturgical formality. That isn't the way God looks at it. He wants you to know that he yearns for your repentant return so that he can embrace you with his grace and forgiveness. He longs for you to see that the world can only give you a hog slop of indigestible pods, but that you are always welcome to come and put your feet under his table where you can feast on his generous gifts of mercy in Christ.

But this morning, as touching as it is, I don't want to dwell on the story of the prodigal son. Today I want to direct your attention to the story of the *Lost* son. "Well, isn't the prodigal son the one who was lost?" Yes, and "was lost" is the key phrase there. At the end of the story the younger son has been found and restored. It's the *older* brother who is standing outside complaining bitterly about his father's way of handling family affairs. He's making spiteful accusations against his younger brother. And even though he's never left home, because of his lack of love and his unforgiving attitude he is just as lost as his brother ever was.

It's this older brother that the parable is really about. Jesus directed this story to the Pharisees and Scribes who were complaining about the way he welcomed sinners. And if you'll take a look at the back of your bulletin, you'll see that today's Gospel reading skips verses four through ten of this chapter of Luke. The portion that's missing is two short parables: that of the lost sheep, and the lost coin. That's the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to find the one that was lost, and the woman who lost one of her ten coins and practically turned her house upside down to find it. In both of those stories, the searchers find what they are looking for, and then they throw a little party for their friends to celebrate the recovery of what they'd lost. Now, it happens that the value of the thing lost in both of the stories turns out to be the equivalent of about fifteen days' wages – and most of us would agree that a half month's pay is nothing to sneeze at. The shepherd would have had that much docked from his wages if he didn't find the sheep, and the woman would have lost that much from what was probably her life savings. So we can understand their joy at recovering what had been lost. And Jesus ends the stories by saying something to this effect: "Do you think that's something to celebrate? I tell you that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents."

Now, the Scribes and Pharisees have listened to these two stories. And they understand how good it would be to find a lost sheep or a lost coin. And that's when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son – about the repentant return of a sinful human, who is worth infinitely more than any coin or lamb. The boy's father is beside himself with joy, and he's pulling out all the stops to celebrate. And according to Jesus, this party is a mere shadow of the corresponding celebration among the angels of heaven over one sinner who repents. So it happens that while heaven and earth are rejoicing, the older brother, like the Scribes and Pharisees, is standing on the outside, his arms crossed, looking on with anger and disgust: "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" And Jesus tells these parables to say, "You bet I do; and so should you. What's wrong with you that you don't?"

And for those of us who have been faithful, hard working Christians all of our lives, or at least since coming to the faith, sometimes it just doesn't seem right. With the older brother, something inside of us would feel offended if suddenly everyone was bending over backward for some wayward former member or a habitually inactive member who having sown his seed to the wind suddenly found himself reaping its whirlwind of disaster and then came rushing back to the church to find relief. Though we might not give voice our thoughts, our natural reaction would be to think, "He's got a lot of nerve coming back in here after what he's done. And now he's getting exactly what he deserves. I'll be damned if I'm going to lift a finger to help him now.

Everybody warned him; but he wouldn't listen. Well, it's just too bad. Let him suffer in the hole he dug for himself. Besides, what about *me*? What about the rest of us? We're the ones who have been keeping the faith and trying to live God pleasing lives. And who do you think has been doing all the work to keep this place going all these years? It sure wasn't him. Who's been teaching Sunday School and organizing the fund raisers and serving on the council? Who's been paying the bills? Me, that's who. But as soon as he needs something he comes waltzing back expecting everything to be here for him – even though he never lifted a finger to support it. No, if this church is going to help anyone, it should be someone who deserves it.”

Sound vaguely familiar? Have you ever felt that way? Do you feel that way about someone right now? Sadly, that's not the end of it because the attitude doesn't extend only to members who have strayed, but also to people who've never been members at all. And you know who I mean: those people in this community whose standards of conduct are unacceptable, who have problems *“that we just don't need in this church. They are not our kind of people”*. But then, we can excuse ourselves thinking, *“they wouldn't feel comfortable in here anyway”*. Of course this raises the question: “Would they not feel comfortable because their Father wouldn't welcome them, or because *we* wouldn't?” How much of the older brother is in each of us? And how many of our younger brothers stay away because of us? Something the people who heard Jesus tell this story would have understood was a social custom that made it the older brother's responsibility to be the acting host of any celebration in his father's house. He would have been the one doing most of the work to ensure that guests – and most especially the guest of honor – were being taken care of. And yet in the story, anger and hostility prevent the older brother from fulfilling what was expected of him.

And what we really need to ask is, “Where does this hostile attitude the older brother displays come from? What is its source?” Well, first there's envy. At some level the older brother wishes that he too could have run off and wasted a fortune indulging in every fleshly pleasure. The daily routine of being hard working, upright, and responsible lacks excitement. His little brother seems to getting away with what he dare not do – but deep in his heart he'd like to. So, too, each of us has a secret desire to run off from our Father and live on the “wild” side. Of course, it's easy to forget the misery that the younger brother found at the end of that road. Instead of being envious of those who gamble with their eternal welfare and follow their baser desires into temptation, we should be grateful that we have been spared the humiliation and agony of starving among the swine.

Another cause of the older brother's hostility is his own attitude about his work at the family estate. When the younger son comes to his senses, he thinks about going back to work as one of his father's hired hands – a free man who works for wages. He sees the benefits that flow out of his father's house. But the older brother describes his service for his father as “slavery”. Every day he is well fed, surrounded by family and friends, and he has all the comforts and blessings of a safe and secure home; but these he takes for granted. All he can see is drudgery and hard labor. And how often do we see our Christian life in the same way? Filled with God's blessings, we nevertheless think, “All I do is work, and I get nothing out of it. No one appreciates me or what I do”.

And then there's just plain old pride. The older brother attributes his hard work and loyalty to his superior character. Never mind that in his heart he too wishes to run off, and he thinks about his work as an unrelenting burden imposed by a cruel taskmaster. He imagines that it is his own good sense and high integrity that keep on the farm. What a sacrifice he's made! And while we like to think the same thing, we know it's a lie – because every Christian knows in his heart that he is also the *prodigal* son. All that we have is due to the Father's

goodness, not because of anything in us. As Paul writes, *Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.* No, we have nothing to boast about; no reason for pride.

But that doesn't stop us from standing outside the party, fuming with anger born of pride and envy, and wanting to deny our brothers the very mercy we take for granted for ourselves. And so today our Father comes out to plead with us. And it's interesting that he doesn't confront us with a reality check. He doesn't accuse us of the sins we are committing against him and our younger brother. Instead he invites us in with the same heart of forgiveness that he has for the prodigal son. And he asks us to be what his love has made us, and conform our way of thinking to his. "My child," the Father says, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours – you live every day in the blood bought mercy of Christ, and the peace of mind that comes from it. But now look and see what I see: your own brother: lost, helpless, dead in sin, and headed for Hell. And now he's back safe and alive in Christ. It is for this sort of rescue that Christ died. We have to celebrate and be glad."

May God whose mercy is even now conforming us to be like him, give us his heart of longing to see all people come to repentance. May he put to death in us the attitude of the older brother. May he help us to see our work in the church not as a thankless burden, but rather as a privilege that allows us to share in the mission of finding the lost and bringing the dead to life. And sharing in this mission, may we also share in the joy of the angels of heaven who celebrate each and every sinner who comes to repentance. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!