The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

It's no exaggeration to say that this parable has the power to blow away multiple wrong ideas that you might have about God. But for that to happen, you have to understand why Jesus tells this story in the first place. And v1-3 tell us that the Pharisees and scribes, the morally upright and religious people of their day, were offended by Jesus because tax collectors and sinners, people they thought were outside the bounds, were coming to him, and Jesus received them and ate with them. And in that society to eat with someone, was to accept them. But to accept *these* people was totally unacceptable to the Pharisees.

So Jesus tells them this story. Verse 11: 'And he said, "There was *a man* who had *two* sons."' So this isn't just about the one, younger, prodigal son. It's a story about two sons and a father. And what we're going to see is that both these sons are alienated from their father – it's not just the younger son who's lost, they both are. And the younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners who have abandoned traditional morality. But the older brother represents these Pharisees. And they conformed to traditional morality, and they prayed and studied the bible and went to Synagogue and did good works.

But Jesus is saying that both those ways to live, both self-centered hedonism AND moralistic religion, both irreligion AND religion, both *if-it-feels good-do-it* AND strict moral uprightness, are dead end ways to live because they both result in lives alienated from God. And neither throwing off the rules nor obeying the rules gives the human heart what it's seeking.

Instead, Jesus says, there's a third way – and it's the way of grace.

A Son who Leaves
So, Jesus says, there's a wealthy landowner, and his younger son comes to him and says, v12, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' So this young man wants his inheritance, and he wants it now. But when do you get inheritances? When your parent dies! So this son is effectively saying, 'Dad, I wish you were dead, because then I could have my share of your stuff. So can I have it now, anyway?'

And Jesus says in v12 that in response the father 'divided his *property* between them'. But Luke uses the word *bios* for property, and *bios* means 'life'. So in doing this, there's a sense in which the father is dividing his life, that part of him is dying as he does this. But that's what the son wants –isn't it? He wants his dad's stuff but not his dad. He wants to be able to live as if his dad were dead.

And, so, the father gives him what he wants. And Jesus says in v13, 'Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country.'

You see, this young man thinks that the way to happiness is getting free of his father, and doing his own thing, and realizing his own goals. He wants to be the one who decides what's right or wrong for him. So he gets as far away from his father, and his father's authority, as he can. And he's a picture of these tax-collectors and sinners who have thrown off God's good word for their lives.

But the tragedy is that in wanting to be free, this young man ends up a slave. Jesus tells us in v13 that in this far country 'he squandered his property in reckless living.' And whatever felt good and right to him, he did, because 'this will give me what I want, what I'm looking for'. The problem is that, as so often happens, the life that promised so much failed to live up to its promises. And a terrible low followed the high. And look how it begins: v14, 'a severe famine arose in that country.'

Now, you could blame him for spending all his money, but you can hardly blame him for the famine, can you? And, no doubt, at the time, he would have thought this famine was the worst thing that could happen to him. And yet, it's the famine that begins the chain of events that starts him on his long journey home. And maybe there will be times in your life when the equivalent of a famine hits you – maybe that's circumstances outside your control, or pressure added to pressure, and it brings you to your knees. But all along, whilst you think this is the worst thing that could happen to you, God's at work, turning you homeward.

And Jesus says, v14, 'he began to be in need'. He realizes he's not as self-sufficient as he thought; that life outside his father's house is not as safe as he thought. And in v15 Jesus says, 'he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country.' Now, just think about that. This young Jewish man, who escaped his father to be free, ends up a servant to a gentile pig farmer, longing to eat pig food. But, Jesus says, v16, 'no one gave him anything.' This is as low as you can go. Even pigs are treated better than him. But can you see the irony? In attempting to find himself, to be truly him, to be truly *human*, he's ended in an almost subhuman existence.

But whilst he represents these tax-collectors and sinners, he's more than that, isn't he? He's also a picture of any of us who want to and try to live without God, who want to live as if God were dead, and has no claim upon our life, no say over how I live my life. And just like him, we want to do what we want to do; to be the one who sets the rules for our own lives. And we resent and rebel against God's authority, and have run away from the Father. But also, just like him, you discover that the world that promises so much lets you down. And you end up in a far away country, hungry for something that will truly fill your emptiness.

Now, what would the Pharisees and scribes be thinking so far? Yup, those tax collectors and sinners are lower than pigs, and this younger brother is getting *exactly* what he deserves. And they would have left him in the pigsty. But Jesus doesn't. And the son starts longing for home. And when you hear those echoes in your heart, telling you, 'there must be more to life than this, that life shouldn't be like this', you're experiencing that longing, that homesickness for the peace and inner security, and meaning, and love, that you'll only ever find in the Father's house.

So, as they often do, adverse circumstances crystalized this man's thinking, and Jesus says, v17, "He came to himself". And sitting in a pigsty, at rock bottom, with his world broken around him, he starts thinking straight.

And whatever change in our lives the Lord wants to bring about, to see our lives as they *really* are, with all the make-up removed, is the first step back to the Father. And he decides to go back home, and humble himself, and confess his sin before his dad. So he rehearses what he's going to say. Verses 18-19: '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 knows that he deserves nothing from his father, that he's forfeited all his rights as a son. So he won't make any excuses; he will simply throw himself on his Father's mercy and ask for the chance to work, to pay back his debt of disgrace and earn his dad's forgiveness.

But how will his father respond? He won't know, will he, unless he turns his steps towards home. And whether you're not yet a Christian, but you know you need to come back to God your Father, or if you are a Christian but you know you're stuck in the pigsty of some sin, coming to your senses, and knowing your need is the first step, but repentance, and turning away from sin and towards God, is the next.

And Jesus tells us how God responds to those who come like that.

A Father who Runs

Verse 20: 'And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.'

Now, how come the father sees him while he's still a long way off? Because he's been watching, and longing, and hoping for this day. And when he sees him, his heart overflows with compassion, and he starts running.

And no middle-eastern father, in this culture, would ever have responded like that. Children ran, and women ran, but not men, and certainly not wealthy, patriarchal landowners. But this father picks up his skirts and runs and throws himself upon his son and embraces and kisses him. And all for a son who has disgraced and humiliated him.

And he does it all before the son says a word. Before the son can let his father know how sorry he is, the father lets him know how loved he is. And when his son starts his speech, the father interrupts him and the son can't get out the bit about working! Before he can say any of that his father is calling for the best robe, and a ring for his finger, and shoes for his feet. Nothing his boy can say or do could make his father love him any more than he already does.

And think, who would the best robe in the house belong to? The father. So he covers his son, shamed by the pig-muck of sin, with his own robe. And why a ring? Because it would have been a signet ring, with the family crest. And putting it on his finger he's saying, 'this is my son!' And he's come back barefoot, and only slaves go barefoot, 'so bring my son some shoes, he's a freeman!'. No paying back the debt, no serving or earning or working, just: 'this is my son, he's home'.

And then the father calls for a party: v23, "And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate." So the calf that would have been kept for a major feast day gets thrown in, because to this father, what could give greater cause for feasting and dancing than the fact that, v24, 'This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'

And so, in response to religious people grumbling that he receives sinners and eats with them, Jesus says, '*but this is what my Father is like!'*. His heart is full of compassion and he rejoices when a lost child comes home. And sure, this son had squandered his life in wild living, but you know the really wild thing is God's extravagant grace, towards tax collectors and sinners, and you and me. And you could never earn your way back in. But you don't have to. You just have to come home, and receive the Father's grace.

You see, this younger son had looked for the party of life apart from the father, but he finally finds what he's been looking for, fullness of life, with joy and wholeness, in the house of his father. And you can search for significance and meaning in far off countries of the soul, and pursue ever-greater highs, but you'll only ever find what you're truly seeking when you come to your father.

But, the story doesn't end there. This younger son has an older brother:

A Brother who Searches

Now, the Pharisees were the moral opposites of the sinners and tax collectors, because hey obeyed the rules. And in Jesus' parable, they're represented by older brother. But you don't get to meet him until v25, when Jesus says, 'Now his older son was in the field.'

And what's he been doing in the field? And the answer is, working - because he's always working. You see, when his father comes out to him he says to his dad, v29, "These many years I have served you." These *many* years, day in and day out, I've served you – or, as you could translate it, *slaved* for you. So, unlike his younger brother, this son always did his duty, he always did what was right.

But what drove that? What motivated his serving and his slaving? Was it love for his father? Well, Jesus says, v28-29, 'His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look…'' Now, culturally, no one would speak to their father like that. And by refusing to join the feast, and by making his father come out to him, he doesn't just insult his father and humiliates him in front of his guests. And look again at v29, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." And instead of love for his father, he sees his father as a master to be obeyed. So whilst now his younger brother would have considered himself fortunate to become a slave of his dad, his older brother resents it.

So, if it isn't love for his father that's motivated his years of service, what has? Well, there's the irony, because it's love for himself. It's what he hopes to gain from his service and his obedience. Verse 29: 'I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.' You're giving him a banquet but you've never so much as taken me to Holy Cow!

You see, he thought that by serving he would get something in return from his dad. He thought that the way to his inheritance and to the party of life, was by *obeying* the rules. And his claim upon his father is based on his hard work, his obedience, his morality.

And that, Jesus is saying, is the dead end of moralistic religion: that you think that you can earn favour with God, and deserve your young goat, and merit your salvation, by obeying the rules. And that's what motivates every older brother.

Now, don't you feel just a twinge of sympathy for him? I mean, his younger brother *doesn't* deserve this feast, and he *does* deserve his goat, doesn't he? Or so we think. And deep inside each of us we think we can, or must, earn and deserve our heavenly Father's favour. So, in a sense, we're all older brothers.

But what happens when doing the right thing costs you, rather than brings you gain? Because if doing the right thing is costly, we're going to need a higher motive than self-gain, and self-interest, if we're not to choose the wrong thing, won't we? And what if, in spite of your moral life, in spite of obeying the rules, life doesn't go well? If you don't get your young goat. And if you think you *deserve* recognition, or blessing, in this life, what will keep you from the bitterness and resentment of this older brother if it doesn't come?

You see, as you look at him, what do you think is his underlying problem? It's pride, isn't it? In v29 he says, 'I *never* disobeyed your command.' So he thinks he has no sins to confess, and from the high tower of his moral superiority, he looks down his nose on his younger brother who he can't even bring to call 'my brother', but, v30, '*this son* of yours'. And like him, every older brother thinks they can save themselves by their moralistic religion or, today, their scientific rationalism, and they're critical, and judgmental, of those who are not as good, or as rational, as them. And just in case you're thinking of someone who's just like that, remember: we can even be older brother-like about older brothers!

And as the anger and frustration of the years pours out of him, can you see how thinking that you have to earn the favour of God destroys your joy? Because, from what the father says, he could have had a party anytime he wanted, he only ever had to ask. But if he thinks he's got to deserve it, he can never know, he can never have the inner assurance, that he's done enough to ask. Because you can never know if you've really made the grade. And so, thinking it's all about obeying, the older son ends up outside the feast.

And so the Father goes out to him. And whilst his eldest son has spoken harshly to him, look how the father responds: v31: 'And he said to him, 'Son…' . And he pleads with him to come join the feast and accept his grace, because he loves this older son just as much as the younger. And God loves hardened and self-righteous Pharisees just as much as every prodigal.

So, can you see how this older brother is just as lost as his younger brother? Both resented their father's authority. Both wanted control of their lives. Both were more interested in their father's stuff than their father. Neither loved the Father for himself. And both are alienated from him.

But, incredibly, it's the older brother's pride in his moral record that keeps him outside, whilst his younger brother, who has come to realize that he is a sinner who deserves nothing, is on the inside. The older brother thinks he's the insider, when all the time his refusal to share in his Father's grace leaves him an outsider.

And so, through this story, Jesus is telling us that the gospel is not legalism or licentiousness. It is not moral conservatism or liberalism. It's not throwing off the rules or obeying the rules. It's God's lavish grace, to older and younger brothers alike. And none of us deserve his love and mercy; and none of us could ever earn it. Yet he invites each of us to come inside and feast on his goodness.

But, as we finish, do you remember how in the previous two parables, that we looked at last week, there was a seeker? The shepherd went in search of the lost sheep, the woman went in search of the lost coin. But here, no-one goes in search of the lost son. Now why is that?

Well, on the one hand, this story is about God the Father standing, waiting for us to come to our senses and come back to him. But on the other… in that culture, who should have gone looking for his younger brother? Wasn't it the oldest son, the first-born? If he loved his father, and loved his brother, he would have scoured the countryside for him to bring him home. But instead of a self-sacrificial older brother, the younger brother has a self-righteous Pharisee as a brother.

You see, if this younger son is to be reinstated as a son, it means less for the older brother, doesn't it? The inheritance will be divided again. And there is always a cost to sin, and to forgiveness. And a brother who's a Pharisee isn't prepared to pay that cost.

But in Christ you have an older brother who willingly takes the cost of your failure upon himself. And what the older brother wasn't prepared to do, *the* Older Brother, your Older Brother, does, and at the cross he paid the price, and took our shame, and our debt, and our guilt upon himself. And he was stripped naked, that we might be covered with the robe of his righteousness. And he was alienated from his father, that we might be restored to him. And like this younger son, we were dead in our sin, but Christ came and died in our place, and rose again, that we might live again, and be welcomed home.

So where's the seeker in the story? Where's the Brother who goes out and finds the lost son? He's the one telling the story. The Son of Man has come, Jesus said, to seek and to save the lost.

So if you're not yet a Christian, but you know you're in a far-off country, or if you are a Christian, but you're stuck in a pig-sty of sin, or your heart is cold towards God and others, and you recognize these older brother tendencies, there is grace and joy for all at the house of our Father. And you don't have to pay, or earn, instead you have to come by faith and you'll find in God every pleasure you're searching for, because Jesus has done the rest.