Two Lost Sons and One Loving Father
Luke 15:11-32

This morning we are going to read what is probably the best loved of Jesus' parables. Traditionally, it's called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I'm going to call it The Parable of Two Lost Sons and One Loving Father, which won't win any awards for snappiness, I know!

Let's start at Luke 15:1

Reading: Luke 15:1-3; 11-32.

Now, most of Jesus' parables have one central lesson, one major point that He wants us to grasp. But this parable is different. Almost at every turn there's something more to it, and when you get your eye in, and start seeing what Jesus is trying to teach us through it, this parable has the power to blow away all your preconceptions about what God is like.

But to see that, you've got to get the context: you've got to see why Jesus is telling the story in the first place. And that was because the Pharisees and scribes, the religiously observant people, we might even say the bible-believing people of his day were offended at Jesus. The tax collectors and sinners, people who were outside the bounds, outside the Gated Community of the Self Righteous were coming to him, and Jesus received them and ate with them. And these religious folks couldn't stomach that, because to eat with someone, in that society, was to accept them.

So in the face of the religious peoples' grumbling, Jesus tells them this parable. So, he's telling it to those who are on the inside, who obey the rules, who live upright, moral lives. In the words of one commentator, he's telling it to people whose 'self righteousness is destroying them and others.'

And look how Jesus opens the story. V11: 'And he said, "there was a man who had two sons."' So this isn't just about one son, it's not just about the one, younger prodigal son. It's about two sons and a father. And what we're going to see is that both the sons are lost. Both of them are alienated from their father. The younger son, he represents the tax collectors and sinners who are coming to Jesus. And they've abandoned traditional morality and as a result are excluded from respectable society. But the older brother, he represents the Pharisees. And they conformed to traditional morality, and they prayed and studied the bible and went to Synagogue and did good works.

And Jesus is saying that both these ways to live are dead ends. Both self-centered hedonism AND moralistic religion, both irreligion AND religion, both *if-it-feels good-do-it* AND strict moral uprightness result in lives alienated from God. The two most common ways people choose to live their lives, Jesus says, both end in cul-de-sacs. And neither throwing off the rules nor obeying the rules give the human heart what it is seeking. They both sell you short.

But the reason this parable is so incredible is that through it Jesus is saying there is another way – and it's the way of grace, it's the way of the Father's feast. And the parable is about how you and I, older brothers and younger brothers, can find our way home, and join the feast.

This week we're going to look at the younger brother and next week at the older brother.

A Dead-End Living
Jesus paints the picture of a wealthy landowner; and his younger son comes to him and says in v12, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' The boy, he's probably in his late teens, wants his inheritance, and he wants it now. But the funny thing about inheritances is that you get them 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 when it comes to dividing the father's property Luke uses a fascinating word for property: it's the word *bios*, which means 'life'. So when he divides his property, the father is dividing his life. Part of him is dying. But that's what the son wants. He wants to be able to live as if his dad were dead. He wants to be free of his father. He wants his dad's stuff but not his dad.

And amazingly 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.'

This young man thinks that the way to happiness and life is getting free of his father, and doing his own thing, and realizing his own goals, and escaping from society's constraints. He wants to be the only one who can decide what is right or wrong for him. So he gets as far away from his father, and his past, as he can.

Now he's a picture of the tax-collectors and sinners who were coming to Jesus. But he's also a picture of anyone who wants to live without God, who wants to live as if God were dead, or a least is a long way away, and has no claim upon him, no say over how I live my life. He's a picture of the person who wants to escape the suffocating closeness of religion and religious legalism and in the process abandons God and anything to do with him. He is our post-modern society which wants to throw off the shackles and be free of God. He is the individual who wants to enjoy God's goodness and provision, all the father's stuff, without any relationship with the father.

But the tragedy of this younger son, is that in wanting to be free he ends up a slave. Jesus tells us in v13 that in this far country 'he squandered his property in reckless living.' As one translation puts it, he spent everything, "in the wildest extravagance." Separated from his father, he pursued a life of pleasure; and whatever felt good he did it. He goes on a spending spree, thinking that living like this will give him what he wants. But in the process he squanders his inheritance. All that he could be, all that his father might have wished him to be, he squanders.

And then it all came crashing down around him. The life that promised so much failed to live up to its promises. Did it feel good? Sure it felt good! Was the freedom and the money and the sex and the drink and the food and the parties, intoxicating? Sure they were. But a terrible low follows the high, as ultimately it always will. And Jesus said, v14, 'a severe famine arose in that country.'

Now, whilst he could be blamed for spending all his money, no one could blame him for the famine. On top of his self-inflicted woes, he is now a victim of circumstances beyond his control. Or is he a victim? No doubt, at the time, that's how he would have felt, but it's interesting that it's the famine that starts him on his long journey back. And there will be times in your life when the equivalent of a famine hits you – a set of circumstances outside your control, a perfect storm that adds pressure upon pressure, a cloud with no silver lining, and yet just as with this famine, God is working your circumstances for your good. It still feels like a famine, because it is a famine. But God, the ultimate father, knows what He's doing.

And Jesus says (v14), 'he began to be in need.' He's realizing through this famine that he's not as self-sufficient as he once thought. He's realizing that life outside his father's house is not as safe as he first thought. And in v15 Jesus says, 'he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country.' He thought that escaping his father would give him freedom, but he ends up a servant to a gentile pig farmer, in poverty and at dead end; feeding pigs and longing to eat what they ate. And for a Jew, that was about as low as you could go. He longed to eat pig food, but Jesus says, v16, 'no one gave him anything.' Because the world has this peculiar habit of setting you up as a hero and dumping you just as quickly. While he had money, and people could get from him, he had friends. When his stuff went, his friends went. And now pigs were treated better than him. It's ironic isn't it, that his attempts to live without constraints, his attempts to find himself and be himself has led him to an almost subhuman existence. The unclean pigs are better off than he.

Now, what would the Pharisees be thinking at this point? Yup, he's getting exactly what he deserves. After all, you reap what you sow. Jesus is saying these tax collectors and sinners are lower that pigs, and yup, I think we can agree with that. And that's where they would have left him, in the pigsty. But Jesus doesn't.

You see, whilst the younger son represents the self-centered person, the person who wants what they want with no outside authority telling them what to do, who through their own choice cuts themselves off from God, in other ways this younger son represents every one of us. Ever since our first parents decided they wanted to live free from the burden of God and his call upon their lives, mankind has been born in exile. Like this young man, in one sense we are all exiles, we have all run away from the Father. We are all in need, in a far away country, hungry and naked and poor. And the world that promises so much, ultimately lets every one of us down. It can never give you what you are really seeking. Through the words of the father Jesus describes such a life as dead, v24, 'my son was dead'. It's a dead end kind of living.

Now, in Jesus' previous two parables, he used the images of a lost sheep and a lost coin. But here he's telling us what it means to be lost. It means to be separated from your father, to be in exile, to follow your own way and end in a pigsty.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. In JC Ryle's words the son discovers that 'sin is a hard master' and he starts longing for home. And though we can try and

anaesthetize it with hard living, at one time or another we all experience that longing for home, those echoes in our hearts that tell us there must be more than this, that life shouldn't be like this. What we are really wanting in those moments is to be at peace, to have an inner security, to be enfolded by that which gives our lives meaning. And Jesus is saying, you'll find that back at your father's house.

Turning Back

Well, as adverse circumstances often do, they crystalized this young man's thinking. They brought his situation into stark relief, he saw his life as it really was and Jesus says in v17, 'He came to himself'. He came to his senses. Sitting in a pigsty he realized just how far he had fallen. Its tragic but still true that sometimes we need to hit rock bottom before we can see the truth. And for the first time in a long time, he starts thinking straight.

And whatever change it is in our lives that the Lord is wanting to bring about, to start thinking straight, to see our lives as they really are, and not an airbrushed version, whilst it's not the whole journey home, it is at least the first step on the way back to the Father. And he decides that he is going to go back home, return to his father, and confess his sin and humble himself before his dad. So he rehearses in his mind what he's going to say.

V18: 'I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."' He realizes that, ultimately, all sin is against God. And it is. It's before God that all of us are accountable. But he also recognizes he has sinned against his father. And sometimes it is easier to confess to God and ignore the others we have hurt, but he doesn't take the easy path, he takes the right path. V19: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

This boy knows that he has forfeited all his rights as a son. He knows he has comprehensively and irretrievably blown it. He knows he deserves nothing from his father. And so he has zero intentions of claiming any of those rights back. He's not going to attempt to gloss over his sin or excuse it. What is going on in his heart is genuine and true, and he will simply throw himself upon his Father's mercy. And he hopes, someway, to make some restitution. He wants to work for his dad as a hired labourer. He wants to try and pay back some of his dad's lost honour, he wants to try and pay off, in some way, his debt of disgrace. He's not going to ask anything from his dad, just the opportunity, the chance to work for him. To earn some food, and to prove by working hard that he is truly, genuinely sorry; that he's changed; that he's learnt. If he can, if his father will let him, he wants to humble himself, take the lowest place and earn his dad's forgiveness.

Now how will his dad respond to that? He has no way of telling unless he actually heads back home. You see coming to your senses and beginning to think straight is the first step in restoring your relationship with God, but what the Bible calls repentance, actually turning back to your father and away from sin, is the next. You can think straight, and see your life as it really is, but stay in the pigsty. To get back home you have to turn your steps back home.

But how will the father respond?

Coming Home
V20: '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.'

While he was still a long way off? How come the father sees him whilst he's a long way off? Because he's been watching for him. Because he's been waiting for him. Because he's been longing to see this day. Because he's been going out day after day hoping to see him and when he does, compassion overflows in his heart and he starts running.

Now you need to know what that means in that culture. No middle-eastern father would respond like this. It was undignified for older men to run. 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 hugs him and embraces him and kisses him. And this for his son who has disgraced and humiliated him.

And he does it all before the son says a word. Before the son can say anything, or try to prove anything, or let his father know how sorry he is, the father lets him know that he loves him and accepts him. But then the son starts on his speech. He wants to say this. He means it: v21, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father interrupts him. The son can't get out the bit about being prepared to work for him and become his servant, and pay back his debt! 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 the son can say or do could make the father love him more. The father doesn't respond well once he's heard his son's prepared to try and pay him back and earn his respect and undo his disgrace. The father doesn't ever get to hear that! This son can't earn or deserve anything, he's not even given the chance! The father just lavishes it upon him.

Now, who would the best robe in the house belong to? The father. He's the patriarch. He covers his son who has been stained and slimed by sin and pig-muck, he covers his shame, with his own robe. The ring would have been a signet ring, with the family crest. So putting this on his finger he's saying, 'this is one of my sons, he's a member of my family'. 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 mine.

And then the father calls for a party: V23, "And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate." He throws a feast and the calf that would have been kept for the major feast days gets thrown in as well, because as far as the father is concerned nothing could be more important or give greater cause for dancing than having his son back.

And Jesus is saying all of this in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling that he receives sinners and eats with them. What a picture of God's grace! This is what God is like, Jesus says. He throws a feast, he sings, he dances when a lost child comes home. The son had squandered his inheritance in the wildest

extravagance, but the really wild thing is God's extravagant grace. This is how God treats lost sons who return. This is the heart of God to tax collectors and sinners and to you and me. Neither they, nor you and I, can or could earn our way back in. We just have to come back, and through repentance experience the total, free, full pardon of God, and know the joy, the inner music and dancing of the heart that comes from experiencing God's grace, and His Holy Spirit making us alive on the inside.

You see, what this younger son had looked for apart from the father, the party life, he finds with joy and holiness, in the house of his father. And you can search and pursue an ever greater high, or inner peace and contentment and fulfillment, thinking you'll will find it out there, apart from God, and Jesus is saying, you'll only ever find it, your heart will only ever find what it is truly seeking, when you come back to your father.

But how can any of this be? You see, this young man knew that his return and acceptance was not a given. He knew that his father, to say nothing of his community, might reject him and send him away again, and push him back into exile. He knew there was a gulf between him and his dad, a breach that needed to be healed. And it's the same with us and God: how can God treat tax collectors and sinners and you and me in this way? How can he cover the slime and stain of our sin? How can people who in the words of the apostle Paul are 'dead in trespasses and sin' (Eph 2:1), be made alive again, as this young man, in the words of his father, was brought back from the dead.

And the answer is Jesus. *The* Son of the Father came to die, that we might live. At the cross, he was forsaken and alienated and rejected by the father that we might be brought home. He was stripped naked, he was disrobed for us, that we might be covered by the robe of his righteousness. When he died, he died for our sins, the sins of every prodigal son, that we might receive his prodigal, extravagant grace and mercy in its place. Not because you and I have paid off the debt, or could earn forgiveness by service, but as the Father's free and underserved gift.

How can it be said of us, like the prodigal, that we once were dead but now are alive? Because Jesus once was dead but now is alive. And the coming back from the dead of every prodigal son and daughter is made possible because *the* prodigal son – the recklessly extravagant Son of God, spent everything, to the last penny, died and was made alive again, for us.

So I don't know where you are at this morning. Maybe you're in the pigsty, just coming to your senses, or maybe you're a Christian but your heart is heavy as you face a famine not of your making or choosing, or maybe your heart is cold toward God, the fire is burning low, and you wish it were different. Wherever you are at, there is grace and joy to be found at the house of your father. You don't have to pay, you just have to come. Jesus has done the rest.