

"Two Lost Sons" - St. Luke 15:11-32

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together". Amen

Luke ch. 15 is the Bible's "Lost and Found Chapter." Jesus told stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. And all of them show the love God has for lost sinners and his eager concern for their return to him. Jesus directed this parable of the prodigal son to the scribes and the Pharisees who were grumbling over Jesus' table companions. "This man receives 'sinners' and eats with them." Who you ate with meant a lot in Jesus' day. The religious types were quick to note that Jesus kept some unsavoury company at His table. Tax collectors, prostitutes, and "sinners." The kind of people with whom a respectable rabbi would not want to be seen with in public, let alone eat with.

The point of this parable is simple: When the lost are found there is rejoicing. And so instead of being party-poopers looking down their religious noses at others, the scribes and the Pharisees ought to rejoice when a sinner repents and join the party. Of course, the ticket to the party is repentance, something of which the religious righteous thought they had no need.

That is what lead into the parable of the prodigal son. In reality it is not the parable of the prodigal son but "The Parable of the Man with Two Sons." Prodigal means exceedingly generous. The son may have been generous until the money ran out but in reality it is the father who is really generous. He is the prodigal father.

A man had two sons. The younger one wanted his share of his inheritance from his father ahead of its time. No matter what culture you happen to live in, you will recognize this as a terrible insult to the father. The son basically wishes his father dead. And since the old man appeared to be in good health, he demands his share of the inheritance on the spot.

The boy's father is unusually gracious. He had every right to punish his son for this insult. But instead he grants his wish, and gives him the share of his inheritance. It must have broken the father's heart to do that, just as it breaks God's heart when we turn away from Him and go off on our own. When we turn away from the church, when we neglect His Word, when we do not take our place at His table. But sons are not slaves. They are free to go, free even to reject father, family, and community.

So the younger son left on an adventure in a far-away country. And as it has happened so many times in the history sinful humankind, the son wasted it. We don't exactly know how it happened. The text simply says that "he squandered his (father) property in reckless living." Penniless, the young man found himself in the middle of a famine. And so he hired on with a citizen of that country who put him to work slopping the hogs. Now for a Jewish boy, for whom pigs were considered unclean, it could not possibly get lower than that. Doing this work, he came to his senses. He had a change of mind. He repented. He realized what he had lost by leaving his father. He realized that even the lowest of his father's servants were fed. He was sorry for what he did.

He confessed his sin: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." He humbled himself: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And then, just in case, he worked out a little deal: "Treat me as the least of your servants, as a hired hand." It seemed like a perfect plan. His father could save face and he would at least have something to eat. The young man got up out of the mud and went back to his father's house. As he came toward the village, he saw a figure running toward him. It was his father! He had been waiting and watching. Looking down the road every day. Hoping for the day when he would see his lost son again.

When he finally saw him, he was filled with compassion, and ran down the road to meet him. The father throws all his dignity out the window and embraces his rebellious son and kisses him, even before he says a word. The son confesses, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father is barely listening. He said to his servants: 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. Kill the fattened calf, and let us eat and celebrate.' And the son did not even get to his deal about being a servant. This was pure grace. Undeserved kindness. The father receives his rebellious son and restores him to sonship. The father is the prodigal one for he is exceedingly generous. This is God's grace toward sinners. His desire to seek and to save the

lost. His joy over the lone sinner who repents and desires forgiveness. This is the Father's zeal to save us, that while we were yet sinners, He sent His Son to die for us. The son that was lost is found; the son that was dead is now alive.

Friends, once we were dead. Dead in sin, dead in rebellion. But God raised us to life in His Son. He gives us the robe of Jesus' righteousness. He puts a ring on our finger. He puts sandals on our feet. He sets a banquet table to celebrate the return of his repentant rebel children. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous religious ones who have no need for repentance.

The older brother thought he was righteous. He was out in the field, dutifully doing his work, as he always did. He heard the music and the dancing. A servant informs him that, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has received him safe and sound." But the older brother was angry, and refused to go to the party. His father came out to him, as he had come out to meet his younger son on the road. This too is the grace of God. He takes the initiative. He always comes out to meet His children. He pleads with the older son. "Come and celebrate. Rejoice. Your brother has come home. He was lost, but now is found."

But the older son will not rejoice. His self-righteousness has robbed him of his joy. He is the obedient son, the good son, the one who always did what his father wanted. Not out of love, but out of duty, responsibility. He says: "Look, all these years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." He tries to justify himself. His relationship with his father is defined by the law, by commandment-keeping, by obedience. He is been working so hard all these years trying to earn his father's love and secure a place in the family. And when he realizes that his father deals in grace instead of works, in Gospel rather than Law, in mercy instead of merit, he comes unglued. "All that I've done for you, and you never threw a party for me and my friends."

He disowns his father and slanders his brother. "When this son of "yours" came, who wasted your living with prostitutes, you throw a big party. And now you expect me to come." The older son was as lost as the younger one. He too wishes the father, and his brother, dead. Still the father remains gracious as ever, just as God is always gracious with us. He says "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

This parable speaks about two sons. Both were sinners. One was lawless without the law; the other was lawless within the law. One rebelled openly; the other rebelled secretly. Both break their father's heart. Both wind up in a far away country - one physically, the other in his heart. Both receive the same fatherly kindness, acceptance, love. Both were forgiven by their father, received as sons, members of the family. Both were in need of repentance - a change of heart and mind - to confess their sin against their father, to receive his mercy and love. One son repented. He confessed his sin against God and his father, and received his father's undeserved kindness. And the other? Well, Jesus deliberately leaves the parable open-ended. Will the older son repent? Will he enter the party? Will he rejoice in the repentance of his brother? Will we?

When we try to define our relationship with God by the Law, by good works, by our obedience, duty, and responsibility we will be like the older brother. We will become bitter, resentful, legalistic, and judgmental. When we try to earn our way into God's favour, as though God would somehow be bound to us by our obedience, we will wind up hating God and resenting His mercy. We will despise our brother and our sister. We will refuse to rejoice in their repentance. And we will miss out on the banquet with Jesus. Only as we repent can we rejoice in the repentance of another. Only as we see ourselves as sinners who cannot save ourselves can we rejoice that Jesus welcomes penitent sinners to His table. Only as we experience the Father's embrace in our own lives, can we rejoice in His mercy to those around us.

The Father sent His Son Jesus to die for all people, for the worst of sinners, for each one of us without exception. And He calls each of us to humble ourselves, to confess our sin, to receive His robe, His ring, His sandals, His inheritance as the children of God. We do not deserve any of it. It's a gift – unearned, undeserved out of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ - a love that seeks all and suffers all to save all.

Repentance is the entry to God's banquet hall, the pass to the party prepared in your honour. Christ our Passover

lamb has been slain. The feast is ready. Confess your sin, and humble yourselves before God. It doesn't matter how good you think you are, whether you are the rebellious younger son or the dutiful obedient older son. We all are in need of repentance. Do not try to cut a deal with God. Receive His mercy. Then we are restored. As the father restored his rebellious son, so he restores us. Once you were rebels, lost and dead. Now you are sons and daughters of the Father, alive in Jesus Christ, co - heirs together with Him of eternal life. And after that, the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. Jesus rejoices to welcome repentant sinners to His table. The lost are found. The dead are raised. Rejoice. The Lord is exceedingly generous to us. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior". Amen