

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus refers to God as his Father. Then he taught to pray to God as “our Father.” It is obviously important that we grasp what Jesus means when he calls God our Father. And I would suggest to you that this is not as easy a task as it first sounds. What makes this challenging is that we don’t have any perfect models of fathers on this earth. If every father was a perfect father, we’d take great comfort in knowing that God is our heavenly Father. But instead, when people hear the word “father,” many negative thoughts can come to mind because fathers are sinners too. So your understanding of “father” might lead you to misunderstand the kind of father that God is to you.

For you, “father” might mean “absent.” Maybe your father was not a part of your life growing up. Maybe your father lived under the same roof, but did not interact much with you. Maybe your father **abusive**... or even just **harsh**. This would strongly skew your understanding of what a father is. Maybe your father was **selfish**. Maybe he was **unloving**. Maybe he had a **drinking** problem. Maybe he was **unfaithful**. Maybe he was a **workaholic**. Maybe he **cursed** a lot. Maybe he was a **coward** and shrank back whenever he should have taken a stand. No earthly father is perfect, so where your father did not mimic or reflect the Heavenly Father, your concept of God as Father will be skewed.

So our understanding of what a true Father is like needs to be calibrated so we can take great joy in calling God our Father. In the parable before us today, Jesus does just that. He teaches us what a true Father is like. And this true Father is your father!

I want to just read through the whole story without commentary first, then we’ll take heart what Jesus is teaching.

Luke 15:1-2 Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:11-31 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive

again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

First of all, this story typically called the Parable of the Prodigal or Lost Son. But that’s not accurate. There are actually two sons in this story, and what I want you to see today is that both of them were lost. In most sermons and most commentaries, most attention is given to the younger son. Then it’s almost like the commentator or preacher doesn’t know what to do with that second son. It seems like Jesus tacked on an extra part of the story that was unnecessary and even distracts from the first part. Many don’t know how to handle that part about the second son.

What I’d like to show you today is that the part about the second son is not an unnecessary add-on. Neither is it a separate or new point that Jesus is making. In fact, it fits perfectly with the point Jesus is making in the rest of parable, and is an essential part if we’re going to get the whole picture Jesus wants us to get. We are meant to compare and contrast the two sons, and if we don’t, we will miss the whole point Jesus is making about God our true Father.

And the point Jesus is making in contrasting the two sons is simply this: every human idea about how to connect with God is wrong. And the way people try to connect with God reveals a fundamental misunderstanding in what kind of Father our God is. So let’s take a closer look:

First, the younger brother. He comes to the father: “Give me my share of the estate.” This would have been shocking beginning to Jesus’ first listeners. In those days, the inheritance was only given after the father died. The older son always got a double portion of the inheritance. So in this case, the older son would get 2/3 of the estate, and the younger son 1/3. In asking for his share of the estate, he was essentially telling his father that he wished his father was dead. He was showing his disdain for his father, his unwillingness to live under his father. He was saying, “I want your stuff, but I don’t want you.” Unheard of!

Now what is even more astonishing is the father’s response. A normal response to such a disrespectful and dishonorable request would be to drive the son out of the house and disown him forever. It would bring great shame on the family to have such a son. But that’s not what the father does. Instead he actually grants the son’s request and gives him his portion of the estate! Come on, Jesus, what father would do that? No earthly father would do that. Jesus is describing the heavenly father.

Now the NIV says, “the father divided his property between them.” But the Greek word here is “bios” from which we get “biology.” Literally it says he divided his LIFE between them. Why does it say that? Yes, by giving away his whole estate, he was giving away his livelihood. But it’s even more than that. In order to give the son 1/3 of his estate, he would have had to sell the land. In those days, your identity was connected to the land you owned. To lose your land was to lose your self. When Israel entered the Promised Land, God made sure every single

family received their own piece of land. It was their stake in God's promises. And God gave laws so that your land could never be permanently lost. There was a way a kinsman redeemer could get your land back for you. There was a year of jubilee every 50 years in which those who had sold their land would get it back again. Without land you lost your very identity as a person, you lost your standing in the community, and you lost your identity in God's family.

So the younger son asked his father to tear his very life apart. And the father was willing. Fathers just wouldn't do that... EVER. But for the sake of his son, this father did. He gave up everything for his son to honor the dishonorable and insulting request of the son – a request that cut at the very heart of the father. This father was hurt, and in response to hurt, we typically strike back. But not this father. He responded to the hurt with love. Amazing.

So the son goes off, leaves the father, gets as far away from him as he can, and squanders the inheritance of the father on wild living. He has nothing left. There is a famine in the land. He gets a job slopping pigs – an animal considered unclean by Jews. This was the very lowest he could possibly get. He comes to his senses.

He wants to go back, and he's willing to do so as the lowliest of the lowly. He knows he can't be a son anymore. But he just wants to work for his father and perhaps begin to make partial restitution for all he did. That's his plan. So he goes back.

The father sees him from afar and he runs. He runs to meet his son! This says so much. First, it says he was looking. He was hopeful! Second, it is the father that goes out to approach the son, not the other way around. Contact was made at the father's initiative, not the son's. Third, running would have been unbecoming a patriarch of the family. He would have to hike up his robe and bare his legs as he run. They just didn't do that.

And yet this father ran. He hiked up his robe, bared his legs, and ran down the road to greet his insulting, disrespectful, shameful son.

And how did he greet him? Did he strike him across the cheek? Did he ridicule him for his behavior that brought great shame on the family? That would have been normal, but again, this father is anything but normal. He throws his arms around his dirty, shameful son who reeked of pig manure. He gave him a huge hug and kissed him. The son starts in on his speech about how he has sinned and his compensation plan. But his father doesn't even let him finish. He calls for a robe to put around him which covers his dirt. A ring for his finger to reestablish his sonship. A fattened calf to be prepared because there would be a huge celebration. He wouldn't earn his way back. The father declared him to be back in the family. The son got the very opposite of what he deserved.

But we're not done, what about the older son? He hears the celebrating and asks what's up. Everything is explained, and let's just say he doesn't share his father's enthusiasm. In fact, he is outraged. Note he's especially concerned about the calf. Why? Meat back then was rare. And if you did have it, it was a delicacy that was enjoyed only in parties celebrated with others. Now remember, this calf for the party was coming from the older son's share in the inheritance. He didn't want any of his possessions being used for that good for nothing younger brother.

So the older son insults and dishonors his father as well. He points to what an amazing and obedient son he was, and yet doesn't even address his father respectfully. “**Look!** [more in the sense of, “look, you...”] **all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.**” He questions his father's love that he never gave him even a goat for him to have a party with his friends. In other words, the older son believes the father has withheld from him what he deserves. He has an entitlement attitude. The father essentially owes him, and he believes his father is in arrears. He's behind on his payments, I mean considering what an awesome son he is.

But look how the father responds, “My son [affection], I still want you at the feast. All I have has been and always will be yours. But your son was lost and now is found. We must celebrate!” And how does it all resolve? We don’t know! Jesus leaves it on a cliffhanger. He does that on purpose because the spiritual story he was telling was also unresolved.

Now what was Jesus teaching here? What is he trying to get across?

Redefines God. God is a father. And here he defines what he means by a Father. He shows how God is a true Father. He is a father that was unlike any father of that time, and he’s unlike any father today as well. Emotional. Generosity. Response to rejected love. Loving. Seeking. Longing for you. Powerful yet tender.

Redefines sin. Now here is where it’s so important that we contrast the two sons so we see a full picture of what sin truly is. With the first son, we see a more traditional view of what sins is... one we’re pretty familiar with. Insulting his father. Prostitutes, Self-indulgent!

Act two: you see a son who is very good. Yet he is also alienated from the father’s heart! One very bad and one very good, yet neither right with the father! Both of them wanted the father’s things, but not the father! Each one used the father to get what they really loved: the status and wealth. One by being very good, one very bad.

Now this is huge. We get the younger son: he was lost because of his badness. But what about the older son? He was lost not in spite of his goodness, but in a sense because of his goodness! Not that being good alienated him from his father, but that he thought his goodness would earn what his father had. He felt that his goodness meant he deserved the father’s stuff. He refused to go the feast for the second son, because “I have never disobeyed you.” He was saying, “I’m so good that you owe me, and you haven’t delivered.” His self-righteousness separated him from the father.

Do you see who Jesus is talking to here? At the very beginning, we heard who the audience was. There were both tax collectors and sinners, and there were Pharisees and teachers of the law. We see clearly who the two sons are. The younger son was the sinners, and the older son was the Pharisees and the teachers of the law; ***and neither of them was right with the Father!*** Both had a fundamental misunderstanding about how you connect to father. And both the “sinners” and the Pharisees misunderstood how you connect to the heavenly Father.

In our world too, there are “younger son” independent types who think that connection to God happens by independence, free-thinking and self-discovery. Obedience and conformity are for the weak! They run off and live how *they* want. They’ve got it wrong. But there are also “older son” types who believe that by their obedience and right belief, they earn and deserve every good thing from God. They are very judgmental of others and feel they are on the right track while those around them are clearly falling short.

Self discovery. Moral relativity.

Moral conformity. Moral absolutism.

Each side says, “This is the way! I am right!” And God says, “You’re both wrong! You’re both making the world a terrible place in different ways.” Both sides divide the world in two. (1) Those who are free and live in their own way and follow their own path say all others are wrong. And they hurt the world through selfish living. (2) But those who think they save themselves through self-righteousness hurt the world too. They are judgmental. They are usually angry and bitter. “I am right and all others are wrong, and how dare they!” You will look down at others and consider yourself deserving of God’s favor.

These are simply different ways to try to get control of the father's stuff! Two ways to try to be your own Savior and Lord. Two ways to try to control your own life. BOTH WRONG! Both seek to manipulate the father to get the father's stuff. "Give me my share and I'll do what I want!" Wrong!" "Give me my share because you owe me for how well I've obeyed you!" Just as wrong! Neither have as their goal to get *the father*.

So which do you lean toward? Self-discovery, independence, free living... younger sonism? Or Moral conformity, obedience, doing what is right so God owes me— older-sonism? God calls both camps to repentance today. He tells us both: you are not your own savior! And he invites: Love *me!* Know me. Come to me. Have relationship with me. Because he is good. He is generous. Kind. Loving. Merciful. Patient. Forgiving.

Whichever camp you're in, you need three things: (1) The initiating love of the Father. (He goes out to both the younger brother and the older brother!) And he comes to you. (2) Don't repent of just sin. But of SIN – for the wrong reasons beneath your actions. What motivates you? Don't only repent of what you did wrong, but also for the right things you did for wrong reasons. (3) Be melted and moved by what it cost to bring you home. Cost nothing to either son – but the Father gave up everything – all he had literally belonged to both sons!

Now what Jesus doesn't go into here, but we know, is the cost to Father also involved giving up his most precious possession: his own Son, Jesus. You could say Jesus is the perfect older brother who doesn't show up in this parable because he's telling the parable. That perfect older son was never in it for the father's stuff. In fact, he gave up the authority and majesty of heaven for a search and rescue operation on this earth. He gave no mind to the stuff of the Father, and instead enjoyed the relationship with the Father. He is the perfect older son who was stripped naked of his **clothes** and nailed to a cross, so that you could wear the robe of his righteousness. He was forsaken by his heavenly Father on the cross – you sin meaning he was not treated as a son – so that you could be declared sons of God in Christ Jesus. He paid the debt for your sin at enormous expense to himself! He held nothing back, but gave it all for you.

And so your heavenly Father is looking out at you as you sit there right now. As you sit there thinking about the guilt of your sins. As you bear a heavy burden because of something you've done in your past. As you feel deep regret over your behavior, your words, your actions, your selfish living you mask as self-discovery, your struggle to forgive another, you recognize your judgmental attitude toward others, your feeling that you are better than others, you see clearly that you have often thought God somehow owes you for how hard you've tried and how good you've been... as you sit there wondering if God could forgive you – even you – for that thing that troubles you deeply right now... know this. Your True Father is running out to you right now. That's right, God almighty looks rather undignified now as he runs out to you, embraces you in spite of the filth of the pig manure on you and kisses you. He throws a party for you he's so excited to be with you. And you who tend to be self-righteous, he comes to you too and invites you to the very same party – the party of the kingdom, the party celebrating his grace. He invites you to the heavenly banquet. He invites you into a personal and intimate relationship with him... not so you can get stuff... but so that you get HIM. And you will know belonging and identity and peace and contentment like never before.

Friends, this is your true father. He loves you more than you can possibly imagine. And knowing this changes your motivation to serve and obey him. Rejoice in that relationship! Amen.