

Sermon: Celebrate the return      Psalm 32      Luke 15:1-3, 15:11-32

The Parable of the Prodigal Son; or The Lost Son, if you like; is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. It's a story about loss, repentance, resentment, and the overwhelming grace of a loving father. As Jesus tells this parable, He is challenging and inviting His audience to see themselves in the characters. Jesus is challenging and inviting us to do the same. Whether we identify with the rebellious younger son, the judgmental older son, or the loving father, this story has profound lessons about God's mercy, and how we might embrace His overwhelming grace.

Today's parable looks at rebellion; the younger son wandering from home to squander his inheritance. It looks at repentance; that same son coming to his senses. It looks at the older son's resentment and anger toward his brother *and* father. It looks at the father's unconditional love; showing us that God's grace is boundless, welcoming the repentant sinner home with open arms, while challenging the self-righteous to embrace open-mindedness and forgiveness. It is true that the Parable of the Lost Son is one of the most beloved stories in the Bible.

The audience before Jesus consists of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes. Tax collectors were considered to be outsiders and therefore, obvious candidates for redemption. The sinners were people who *miss the mark*; missing God's mark and the whole point of his or her life. The Pharisees were portrayed as nitpicky enforcers of Scripture who are focused so intently on the letter of the Law that they miss the spirit entirely. Like the Pharisees, the scribes were professionals at interpreting the letter of the Law while also ignoring the spirit behind it. Additionally, the scribes edited the Law according to their own biases; what we today call *redaction*.

So, in the culture of the day, the younger son's act of rebellion was seen as offensive to some and no big deal to others. 'Hey Dad, just give me my money now so I can get on with my life?' This then sets the stage for a story of unexpected grace and vindication. From this, we can see how God interacts with us. The father's response to the younger son's return demonstrates the immeasurable and steadfast love of God, who welcomes everyone who sins back home with open arms. The older son's reaction reflects the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, where we see the tension within the self-centred person. The younger son's journey from rebellion to repentance shows us the transformative power of acknowledging one's sin and turning back to God.

This parable emphasizes the joy in heaven when the lost are found, celebrating the restoration of a broken relationship with God. This story is not just about one prodigal son but about the extravagant love of a father who lavishes grace on both his rebellious younger son and his judgmental older son. This story speaks to us today because it sheds light on experiences most of humanity has encountered at one time or another; failure, forgiveness, and restoration. For the rebellious among us, we may relate to the younger son, burdened by guilt and longing for forgiveness. This parable offers hope that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. For the judgmental among us, the older son's response challenges those who struggle with envy, pride, or resentment, reminding us of the joy found in grace rather than compliance. For the broken-hearted among us, the father's love reflects the heart of God, comforting those of us who grieve over wayward loved ones and encouraging us to remain steadfast in prayer. For all of us, this story calls us to examine our own heart, whether we have wandered from God ourselves or are

disapproving of others' actions, and invites us to rejoice in the grace that welcomes the lost home. So, the Prodigal Son is a timeless reminder of God's relentless pursuit of all His children and His desire to restore broken relationships. Jesus reveals the heart of the Gospel that God's grace is available to everyone, whether they come to Him from the far point of rebellion or local fields of compliance. This story invites everyone to embrace the joy of being found and then to extend that same grace to others.

The younger son demands his inheritance, leaves home, and squanders everything living an indulgent life. In demanding his share of the inheritance, the younger son essentially wishes his father dead. He chooses the path of self-indulgence, leading to brokenness and despair. I can't help but think of the leadership of our friends south of the border. I'm not making a political statement, but using them as an example of people who appear to pursue worldly pleasures, discover their own emptiness, get angry about it, and still long for more. I think this illustrates the emptiness of life apart from God.

But then the younger son comes to his senses, realizes his mistake, and humbly decides to return to his father, hoping to be accepted as a servant. His circumstance has turned his heart, and he acknowledges his sin against both heaven and his father. His repentant heart fuels his desire to return home.

Did you know that renowned author, C.S. Lewis; who wrote "The Chronicles of Narnia"; was once staunchly atheist? After years of intellectual struggle and influence from Christian friends like J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, Lewis surrendered his heart to Christ, and then went on to become one of the most influential Christian thinkers and authors of the 20th century. His works, including "Mere Christianity" and "The Problem of Pain" continue to inspire Christians around the world. C.S. Lewis's story is a reminder that God can and does reach anyone, no matter how far they may seem from faith. It's like C.S. Lewis had to feel the pangs of hunger from the pit of his stomach to recognize his own emptiness and then seek the nourishment that only God can provide by reconciliation in Christ.

And this is where we encounter the father's forgiveness and the older son's reaction. The father runs to embrace his son, forgiving him completely and celebrating his return. The older son, however, reacts with resentment and anger. The father's response is extravagant, full of grace and love, representing God's heart for the repentant sinner. The older son's anger reflects the self-righteousness of those who struggle to accept God's grace for others.

I think it's safe to say that many relationships have some form of dysfunction. This can result from a number of things. Families and friends have disagreements; feuds where one person chooses to forgive; which leads to healing; while another holds on to bitterness and resentment; missing out on the joy of reconciliation. God's love is unconditional. The father's willingness to forgive and restore his son demonstrates God's boundless love. He doesn't wait for an apology but runs to embrace the repentant sinner. Think about how much God loves you. None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes. I know I do. And God is always ready to forgive and welcome us back. This is a good news message of encouragement we must share with family, friends, and neighbours. The younger son returning home shows us the importance of turning back toward God which requires an acknowledgment of our wandering and squandering and a change of heart.

Turning to the older son again, his anger reveals a lack of grace and a heart hardened by self-righteousness. It's a reminder that we must rejoice in God's grace for others, and not resent it. We all know the peaceful feeling we get when we extend grace to others. We are celebrating God's forgiveness rather than harbouring bitterness or envy.

So, what practical insights do we see in today's parable? How is this relevant to us? Let's see if we identify with one of the characters. How about the younger son; do you feel a need to repent and return to the father? Or how about the older son; do you struggle with self-righteousness? Or do you see yourself more like the father; called to extend grace and forgiveness? Perhaps this week everyone of us can take a step toward reconciliation of one form or other, whether it's seeking forgiveness, offering forgiveness, or letting go of bitterness. This is a growing edge for me personally, and I pray about it often. There have been times in my life when I know I have hurt someone, and times when I myself have been hurt. So, I know what it feels like to want forgiveness for myself and to extend forgiveness to someone else.

Today's parable is a powerful reminder of God's love, the importance of repentance, and the call to extend grace to others. Whether we identify with the rebellious younger son, the judgemental older son, or the gracious loving father, the message is clear. God's love is always ready to forgive, and He invites us to celebrate the return of the lost. I encourage all of us to embrace God's grace in our own lives and extend it to others. This story; which has touched hearts for centuries; is simply an invitation to come home.

To God be the glory.

Amen.