

Luke 15:25-32

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Jesus told three parables in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling at how He mingles with sinners. This third parable is often called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” This is Part 2 of this parable.

It is about a father with two sons who do not understand their father’s love and grace. The second half of the parable tells how the older son bitterly pouted and scolded his father for celebrating his lost brother’s humiliating return. The father graciously reminded his older son of his love for him and that it was his brother who returned. The father invited him to choose joy and forgiveness and join the celebration because, as he put it: “This brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.”

There is no apparent parallel for this parable in the other gospel accounts.

The first half of Jesus’s “Parable of the Prodigal Son” ended like the previous two parables, with a celebration of the finding of something *lost*—in this case the repentance and return of the younger *son*.

In the first parable, “The Parable of the *Lost Sheep*” (Luke 15:3-7), the shepherd celebrates the finding of the one *lost* sheep. In the second parable, “The Parable of the *Lost Coin*” (Luke 15:8-10) the woman celebrates the finding of her one *lost* coin. In the first half of this parable (Luke 15:11-24), the *father* celebrates the return of *his lost* younger *son* from the distant country (“Choran Makran”).

Jesus told the Pharisees and scribes these parables as a response to their grumbling about how He was receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2). All three parables symbolically reveal God’s heart toward sinners and the joy He has when they repent.

Jesus could have ended the parable here and made this point. But He doesn’t. He continues with what is functionally a sequel parable that focuses on the response of the *older son* to *his brother’s* return and *his father’s* celebration. The *older son* is likely intended to represent the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

In the first half of the parable, we were told about:

- the younger *son’s* graceless mentality that reduced everything, including his *father*, to their immediate material benefit for himself
- his journey into the moral abyss of loose living
- the dehumanizing effect of the distant country (“Choran Makran”) and its soul-sucking moral void
- the younger *son’s* return to his senses as he plotted his return home to ask his *father* for mercy

- the *father's* bottomless love and grace toward *his* formerly *lost son* as *he* affirmed *his* belonging and restored *him* into fellowship of the family
- the celebration of *his* return—God's heart toward repentant sinners

Through all of this we were given a glimpse into

- the heart of a penitent sinner
- God's incredible love for sinners (since the *father* appears to represent God)
- God's profound joy over sinners returning to Him

Just as the first half of “The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*” focused on God (as represented by the *father*), and His grace toward licentious sinners (as represented by the younger *son*), and His joy over them when they repent, so too does the second half of this parable focus on God, and His gracious invitation to legalistic sinners (as represented by the *older son*).

The *father* is the main character of this parable about the prodigal family. And each *son* represents two different types of sinners, each in need of grace.

The Older Son

The second half of the parable begins: *Now his older son was in the field.*

The word *now* is used to pivot the story's scene from the *father's* joyful embrace of his *lost-but-found* younger *son* to *the older son* who up to this point has only been mentioned once—at the very start of the parable (Luke 15:11). *Now* also indicates that while the *father* was reuniting with *his* younger *son* and beginning to *celebrate*, *his older son was* at that same time *in the field*. The fact that the *older son* was *in the field* indicates that the *older son* was faithfully tending to his duties. *He* was doing the work of the family business that day, apparently as *he* did every day. Although faithful in *his* duties, we will soon see that the older son was missing the proper motivation.

Meeting obligations to God and others is generally a good thing. God issues commands to His people, and it is always best to obey God. But the heart of God's commands is to love Him and to love people by seeking their best (Mark 12:29-31). We seek our best when we trust God and follow His ways. But legalism does not obey God. Rather, it follows rules. And the Pharisees followed their set of rules. They did not follow God, much less love Him. Jesus told the Pharisees this when He said:

“You invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

‘This people honors Me with their lips,

But their heart is far away from Me.

‘But in vain do they worship Me,

Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”

(Matthew 15:6b-9)

Because the Pharisees did not love God, they did not love people either (John 14:15). The Pharisees and scribes were joyless and merciless rule-followers who measured a person's worth according to their moral performance; and they were the (quite biased) judges. There was no place in their hearts for love or grace.

In this regard, *the older brother* was just like *his* younger *brother* at the beginning of the parable. Both brothers measured a person's value according to worldly, materialistic systems. The younger *brother* used materialism as his external measuring stick. The *older brother* used legalism as *his* external measuring stick. Neither *brother* considered the intrinsic worth of people. Consequently, neither *brother* understood love or grace.

His older son represents the Pharisees and scribes who legalistically attempted to follow God's law by setting up rules (and loopholes to those rules) to measure their own righteousness. The fact that the *older son was in the field* is a way to indicate that *he* was outwardly dutiful—just as were the Pharisees and scribes. And also like the Pharisees, we will soon see that the *older son* was not inwardly obedient. *His* outward obedience merely functioned according to *his* own version of a transactional relationship.

The Older Son Learns about His Brother

And when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

When the older son left the field where he was working, he approached the house. As he approached, he heard music and dancing. This means the celebration was already taking place by the time he left the field. Everyone else, it seems, was already celebrating and it appears that the *older son* was the last to leave *the field*. If this was the case, it may emphasize how *he* was quite dutiful.

The hard-working *older son* was confused *when he heard music and dancing* coming from *the house*. Rather than take *his* cues from the joyful sounds of *the music and dancing* and join the party, or enter *the house* and investigate *things* himself, *he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be*. The image we get from the *older son's* initial response to joy is cold skepticism and aloofness. Like the Pharisees *he* represents, there seems to be little place in the *older son's* heart for love or joy.

One of the servants he summoned answered him: Your younger brother has returned home, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.

It was in this way that *the older brother* first learned of *his brother's* return.

The Older Son's Anger

But the older son became angry and was not willing to go into the house to celebrate his brother. His exclusion from the party is his own doing and he suffers his consequence alone.

The *older son's* initial reaction to *his brother's* homecoming was anger. *He* was so petrified by *his* bitterness, that *he* stubbornly refused to enter *the house* and join the celebration. *His* reaction revealed how devoid of grace and love *his* heart was.

In an ironic twist, just as the younger *son* had exiled himself from *his father's* love to a distant country—the literal void of grace, now the *older son* was gracelessly exiling himself from *his father's* love by refusing to enter *the house* and *celebrate*. It is likely that we are now learning of a heart attitude the *older son* had all along. Though *he* was dwelling in the immediate vicinity of *his father*, *his* heart was far from *him* (Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8; Mark 7:6).

By means of either loose morals or legalism, both brothers had exiled themselves from the blessings of their *father's* love and grace. The younger did so by self-seeking through licentious living. He felt entitled to pursue his own way. The *older* brother it seems is exiling himself from intimacy with *his father* by living a different sort of entitlement, an entitlement based on performance.

The Father's Grace

Then Jesus says a very interesting line.

And his father came out and began pleading with him.

This expression is a subtle but clear indication that the *father's older son* **is** just as *lost* as *his* younger *son was lost*, but in a different way. Moreover, recall how the man left the ninety-nine and searched for his *lost* sheep (Luke 15:4), and how the woman swept her house searching carefully until she found her lost coin (Luke 15:8). So too, does the *father*, in this parable, leave the party “in search,” so to speak, of *his older son*.

Interestingly, this parable never explicitly tells us that the *father* went searching for *his lost* younger *son*. This would seem to mirror the biblical pattern of God turning people over to their own flesh when they are willfully disobedient (Romans 1:24,26,28). But the parable does explicitly tell us that the *father* went *out* to speak to *his lost older son* and was *pleading with him*. This interesting facet of the parable may be Jesus's way of indicating how God loves and goes searching for the *lost* Pharisees and scribes. And could be an invitation for them to reinterpret the first two parables with themselves as the *lost* sheep and coin.

The *father* loves *his older son*. And *he* pleads *with his older son* to relent of *his* anger. *He* invites *him* to come inside. *He* encourages *him* to forgive and love *his brother*. *The father* invites *him* to celebrate and enjoy a share *his* grace. All of these invitations are in the *older son's* best interest. John the Baptist exhorted the leaders of Israel to repent. Jesus is exhorting the leaders of Israel to repent. Peter will exhort the leaders of Israel to repent. But one generation hence, their rejection will lead to another exile from Israel.

It is also worth pointing out, that as Jesus told this parable *He* was *pleading with* the Pharisees and scribes in a similar way (and for similar reasons) as the *father* was *pleading with his older son*.

The *father's* approach to the self-righteous, lovelessness of *his older son*, was also similar to Jesus's invitation to the lukewarm and self-righteous church (Revelation 3:16-17). Jesus told them:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”
(Revelation 3:20)

But the older son shunned *his father's* invitation of grace and persisted in anger.

The Older Son's Lecture

He said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'

The *older son's* lecture of *his father* was just as wrong as *his younger brother's* demand for his share of the inheritance. Both were disrespectful. Both violated the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).

The core of the *older son's* self-justified bitterness was also a misunderstanding of the *father's* grace and love. These were the same confusions that *his younger brother* misunderstood at the beginning of the parable. The younger *brother* shamefully demanded his “gift” of inheritance. But now we find that the *older brother* resented that *he* was never “given” part of *his* inheritance. Although he had not asked, he apparently felt entitled, just as did his younger brother.

Because the *older son* did not understand the nature of grace, *he* measured a person's value based upon their external moral performance. The younger *son* measured a person's value based upon their external material belongings. When external measurements become the primary lens through which we measure a person's worth—their substance/“estate” (“ousia”)—it becomes easy to treat people not as a person made in God's image with intrinsic value but as objects to manipulate to extract what we desire. With an external worldview there is considerably less capacity for mercy, grace, or love.

According to the self-assessed moral measurements of the *older brother*, the *older brother* was apparently a perfect *son*. The word *he* used to begin *his* self-justifying lecture was—*Look*. The *older son* assumed that *his* own moral perfection was plain to everyone. And *he* was annoyed when others failed to recognize *his* moral superiority. *He* condescendingly told *his father*: “*Look*”—as to suggest that if *his father* had any common sense then *he* would see how perfectly righteous *his older son* had been, and how utterly ridiculous the *father* was to celebrate *his* (obviously, to his way of thinking) despicable other *son*.

The *older son* began listing *his* credentials of righteousness.

First, *he* claimed that *for so many years he had been serving his father*. (This may suggest that the *father's* younger *son* was gone *for so many years*.) According to the *older son*, *he* had been faithful to *his father*. And *he* measured *his* faithfulness here by comparing himself to *his* younger *brother*. Apparently, *he* had been going about *his* daily duties while chalking up credits for himself and increasing *his* internal measure of entitlement. *He* apparently did not enjoy an intimate relationship with *his father*, but rather saw *his father* as a source of benefit for himself, just as the younger son did. He was just going about a transactional, self-reliant approach in a different manner; one he is now claiming is morally superior.

But God does not merely measure us according to our external actions. God does not see as man sees (Luke 16:15). God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 21:2; Jeremiah 17:10). The *older son's* heart was corrupt and deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9). And because the *older son's* heart was impure, it blinded *him* from seeing the reality of love and grace (Matthew 5:8; Luke 6:39). It also blinded *him* from understanding *his father*.

Next, the *older son* claimed: *I have never neglected a command of yours*. Once again, in the *older son's* mind *he* was flawless, according to his own moral record-keeping. But as we previously noted, *he* had already violated one of the ten commandments in *his* single moral action described in this parable when *he* dishonored *his father* by lecturing, dismissing, and refusing to fellowship with *him*. This contradicts the *older son's* claim and shows that *his* moral ledger was unreliable.

Then, the *older son* accused *his father* of being unfair. *And yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends*. Despite the *older son's* self-assessed perfect moral record, the *older son* reasons that *his father* had *never* appropriately recognized *him*. *He* never even gave *him* a young goat to celebrate *his* moral achievements, much less a *fattened calf*. Apparently, the *older son* viewed *his father* as a sort of vending machine that was obligated to provide certain benefits if the proper price was paid.

This too reveals how the *older son* was confused about the nature and character of *his father*. *He* could have been enjoying close fellowship with *his father*. Obviously, given *his father's* treatment of the younger *son*, the *father* was full of grace. The *father's* acceptance of both of his sons was unconditional. Their belonging to *him* did not require specific performance.

One cannot be *given* a gift of that to which they are entitled, nor can they be gifted something they have earned. Initially, the younger *son* displayed an attitude of entitlement when *he* demanded that his *father* give to him his share of the inheritance (Luke 15:12). *Now*, the *older son* was claiming that *he* had earned honor and was entitled to *have been given* it a long time ago.

Remarkably, even as the *father* was patiently inviting *his son* to share in *his* grace, the graceless *older son* bitterly accused *his father* of being the one who lacked grace/favor, because *he* did not properly favor the *older son* due to *his* performance. With this picture, Jesus asserts a principle that runs throughout scripture, that God's acceptance is unconditionally offered due to God's love and grace. It needs only to be received. Jesus has now described two ways the great benefits of God's unconditional acceptance of His people can be squandered in experience: 1) through

licentiousness, seeking acceptance from the world, and 2) through legalism, seeking acceptance through man-centered moral superiority.

Finally, the *older son* rebuked *his father* for celebrating *his younger brother's* return. *But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. He held nothing back. He harshly condemned his father, accusing him of being unjust. He might even be inferring that his father is participating with his brother in his immoral spendthrift ways. The older son has now condemned his younger brother as well as his father. In his eyes there is only one who is righteous: himself. This seems to describe the same attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the law to whom Jesus is telling this parable.*

There are three further points to make about the *older son's* accusation.

First, the *older son* distanced himself from both *his father* and *brother*. *He* refused to acknowledge *his brother* as *his brother*. Instead, *he* referred to *his brother* as *this son of yours*. Also, the *older son* never addressed *his father* as “*father*” once throughout this entire exchange. Even the *younger son* called him, “*father*” when *he* made *his* demand (Luke 15:12). The *older son* impersonally addressed *his father* with an accusatory *You*.

Second, the *older son* was essentially saying and acting as though *he* wished *his younger brother* had never returned. *He* would rather *his younger brother* was actually *dead*, than to see *him* live and celebrated by *his father*. This lovelessness was also seen in the *younger son* toward his father when he prematurely demanded his inheritance. Again, despite their apparent differences in how they sinned, the two brothers are guilty of committing the same sins.

And third, the *older brother* accuses *his younger brother* as sleeping with *prostitutes*. In Jesus's summary of the *younger son*, He only described the son as squandering “his estate with loose living” (Luke 15:13). He left this ambiguous. But the *older son* boldly colored in the ambiguity, as sinfully as he could imagine. This may have been how the Pharisees interpreted Jesus's meaning as He told them this parable. And Jesus may have intentionally left the *younger son's* squandering morally ambiguous, and then explicitly named this accusation in the mouth of the *older brother* to more associate the *older brother* with the Pharisees.

The Father's Response

The *father* did not respond in anger. *He* kept *his* cool, and directly addressed the angry accusations against *his younger son* with grace and truth.

Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.

The *father* began by calling *his older son*, “*Son.*” This gently reminded *his son* what was true. *He* further affirmed *his* love for *his son*, by reminding *him*, that *you have always been with me* and in proximity of grace, and all that everything that the *father* owned belonged to the oldest *son*. This underscores that both sons were children of the *father*. That was something they could neither earn nor lose. This is incredibly encouraging. Since all of us are sinners, the only way we can reconcile with God is through His grace and love (Romans 3:23-24). We are then His children,

regardless of our behavior, whether licentious or legalistic. However, our choices have immense consequences, and the Bible consistently exhorts us to make wise choices (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Because the *older son* had an external-legalistic-rule-following-obsession, *he* had missed out on relating to *his father* and enjoying *him*. This gracious remark from the *father* that *you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours* was an invitation to the *older son* to repent (change his faulty perspective) and begin enjoying *his* family now. Despite the Pharisees' bitter resentment of Jesus and His seeking the repentance of sinners, Jesus's telling of this parable was essentially the same gesture toward them, exhorting them to repent.

We can infer that through this parable Jesus was imploring the Pharisees to repent, and come to Him and enjoy fellowship with Him. Sadly, for them, they would later collude with their rivals and enemies to murder Jesus. Although terrible for them, it was a blessing for many in the New Testament age (Romans 11:12).

As an aside, an additional possible reason that the *father* told *his older son* that *all I have is yours* was because the *father* had already given *his younger son* his share of the estate (Luke 15:12). The *older son* still had *his* inheritance coming. *He* was the heir. But in spite of having this inheritance, *he* was not enjoying it. *He* was seeking to earn something *he* already possessed. Similarly, New Testament believers can squander the peace and joy that comes from walking in the Spirit through seeking from the world something that Christ has already granted, that can be experienced through a walk of faith.

After essentially "turning the other cheek" and reminding *his older son* of these things, the *father* wisely and graciously overlooked the pricks and insults of *his older son's* rantings, and *he* reframed the discussion to the core issue.

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.

The heart of the matter was that a long-lost family member had suddenly returned home. It was only good that they *celebrate and rejoice* over his return. The *father's* remark is a reprise of the beautiful statement that *he* spoke upon first seeing *his younger son*, with one important difference (Luke 15:24). Initially, the *father* said "this son of mine," but here in speaking to *his older son*, the *father* referred to *his younger son* as "*this brother of yours.*" This was a reminder that the *lost-but-found, dead-but-begun to live* person was *his older son's* own *brother*. It would be appropriate and good if *his older son* would *rejoice and celebrate with* the family.

Jesus's Points of the Parable's Second Half

There are several points worth noting that Jesus makes in the second half of "The Parable of the Prodigal Son."

The first is that it is entirely appropriate to celebrate the repentance of sinners and tax collectors. This point was also made in the first two parables (and the first half of this one) and can be

observed by the celebrations of the shepherd, the woman, and the *father* when they respectively *found* the *lost* sheep, coin, and younger *son*.

The second was that the Pharisees and scribes were brothers of the tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and scribes are represented by the *older son* and the tax collectors and sinners are represented by the younger *son* (Luke 15:1-2). Neither initially understood or appropriated the goodness of God's grace. Both were in need of grace (as are we all). The younger *son had* come to recognize and experience the father's grace that was always there. But the *older son had* not yet recognized the *father's* grace. *He* was, therefore, still stuck in *his* illusion of self-sufficiency, and self-justification.

A third point is an invitation to the Pharisees and scribes to rejoice with Jesus at the return of their *lost* brothers. The younger *son had been found*. The *older son* was still *lost*. From this perspective: the *older son*, (the Pharisees and scribes) were the one *lost* sheep in the first parable (Luke 15:3-7) and the single *lost* coin in the second (Luke 15:8-10). God was eager and ready to *celebrate* their repentance the moment they let themselves be *found*.

Finally, (and to this third point) notice how Jesus ended the parable. He did not end it by revealing how the *older son* responded to *his father's* invitation. Jesus left the story open. He did this perhaps as a way to suggest that the invitation to *celebrate* and enter into God's grace was also applied and was open to the Pharisees and scribes.

Biblical Text

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. ²⁹ But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; ³⁰ but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"