

[Luke 15:11-32.](#)

The American playwright, Arthur Miller said, “In every successful drama there is something which makes a person say, ‘Hey! That *me!*’” The best stories live on because we identify with them. They stir our emotions, make us think and see the world differently. They even demand we change or take action, and such was the case when Jesus told His parables.

No doubt you’ve heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son—the story of a licentious son, his legalistic brother, and their loving father. It’s a culturally shameful story, for what son would demand his inheritance *before* his father’s death? What father would hand it over? And though the older brother acts as the culture might expect, he’s not the hero of the tale.

This is the third of three parables in Luke 15, each about something lost that’s been found—a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. In each, we see God rejoicing to redeem lost sinners. It was something the religious leaders couldn’t understand. They were in the audience on this day, and Luke says they grumbled that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:2).

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**“HAVING SPENT CONSIDERABLE TIME WITH GOOD PEOPLE, I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY JESUS LIKED TO BE WITH TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS” — MARK TWAIN.**

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*Jesus can’t be from God, because God doesn’t welcome sinners.* The Pharisees would teach the dregs of society, but never would they stoop so low as to welcome or embrace them. They viewed themselves as holy, upright, devout servants of God. As for other Jews, they looked down upon them as people who didn’t know anything about God’s Law. They were accursed (John 7:49).

As the crowds drew near to Jesus, the Pharisees complained. Jesus spoke of two sons and their loving father. The older of the two rejected the younger and reviled his father. The details are familiar to us. Though Jesus didn’t finish the story, we know how it ends.

**THE LICENTIOUS SON (LUKE 15:12-19)**

*Luke 15:13—“...the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.”*

He wanted nothing to do with his father, and we don’t know why. The story begins with the younger son ordering dad to give him his inheritance: *You’re in the way... I’ve waited too long for you to die. Now give me my share of the property!* Even in our culture, that’s pretty low. The young man didn’t care what his family or anyone else in their town thought. He was ready to sever every relationship he’d ever known, run away, and never look back.

After dishonoring his father, the boy might have received a public beating—the father *had* to preserve his honor. Instead, that young man received an early inheritance. The property was divided up, he received his third, and “not many days later,” he “gathered all he had” and left (Lk 15:12-13). He was in a hurry, and the boy didn’t want to be tied down managing anything. All he wanted was money, so he liquidated everything. He sold it off cheap that in “not many days” he could have a pile of cash... and freedom.

It was a foolish plan that only gets worse. The boy headed to a “far country” which is a way of saying he went to live among the *goyim*—Gentiles. They wouldn’t care about Jewish laws. They wouldn’t judge or confront his behavior. He could indulge in all manner of “reckless living” to the fullest (Lk 15:13).

The son threw his money to the wind and hadn’t a thing on him when disaster struck. A famine ravished the land, and in his despair he fed pigs for a local farmer who exploited him. Jesus says the young man was paid so little he ate the pig’s food just to survive. In this cruel land where he had lost everything and needed help, “no one gave him anything” (Lk 15:14-16).

Sin didn’t lead to life and freedom. From a Jewish viewpoint, the boy was eating unclean food with unclean animals owned by an unclean farmer in an unclean land. Even from a Gentile view, the boy’s life became a banquet in the grave. It wasn’t exploding with wonder and excitement, but imploding all around him. Life wasn’t getting bigger but smaller. He was on the verge of starvation and death.

*And good riddance! That’s what happens to sinners!* Those listening to Jesus would’ve expected this to be the end of the story, and yet, the Lord continued: “But when [the prodigal] came to himself...” (Lk 15:17). Hunger and shame awoke the boy to reality that this isn’t real life. He hit rock bottom and finally saw the insanity of all he’d done. He had no choice but to go home.

# The Tale of Two Sons

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He planned what he would say, but how would his dad react? The prodigal didn't know and didn't really care. He was ready to accept any punishment if only his dad would receive him.

## THE LOVING FATHER

(LUKE 15:20-24)

*Luke 15:20—“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.”*

After rejecting his family, disrespecting his community, destroying his body, and violating all moral standards, the prodigal wants to go home. The rabbis taught reconciliation could only occur through restitution—the boy would need to repay all he had lost. Home should mean a life of humiliation and hard labor in service to his father and then possibly to his older brother.

But this isn't what happened. Jesus said the father was looking for his boy. In fact, he saw him “still a long way off.” One would've expected anger and bitterness, even vengeance. A dishonored father could tell his son to stay outside the home for days and beg. He could whip his own publically and humiliate to teach a lesson. And yet, none of that took place. Instead, the father felt compassion.

Emotions were a sign of weakness in the eyes of the Pharisees. Honorable men didn't publically weep or shout for joy; they held a poker face. They were dignified in all expressions even down to the way they walked. A slow, pious sort of walk was the norm—*never* a run. The rabbis forbid running, because running meant lifting one's robe to expose the legs. It was indecent, but this father ran.

The community wouldn't welcome the boy. He rejected them; it was their turn to reject him. The boy knew a gauntlet of scorn awaited him, and his dad knew it as well. By running, embracing, and kissing his son before anyone else could touch him, the dad brought the shame of the whole town upon himself. He received the shame meant for his son (Lk 15:20).

*Luke 15:21—“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

*But I've sinned all the way to heaven and back. Don't you see what I've done?* There would be no punishment, no penance, not even a word about the past. Why? Because this wasn't the same boy. He had changed. The father could see his son would do *anything* to make things right. So, the father took all the shame upon himself and made them right.

Servants were ordered to get sandals, the ring, even the father's best robe. Only those with authority wore sandals, the ring bore the father's seal, and the robe was a sign of dignity. *Get them, and put them on my son!*

None of this would've made sense to Jesus' audience. The story had become irritating by this point. Ridiculous. *That boy wasn't worthy, he should've been beaten! Jesus, no father would act like this this.* At least that's what the crowd thought. And why? Because they didn't know the heart of God.

## THE LEGALISTIC BROTHER

(LUKE 15:25-32)

The celebration was lavish. The fattened calf was slaughtered, guests were invited, music filled the house, and everyone danced. A wealthy family might have one calf, and traditionally, it was set aside for the older son's wedding. It would be *his* calf, for *his* celebration, in honor of *him*.

On the day of the young man's return, his older brother wasn't to be found. He heard music and saw dancing from afar. He was in the field, managing others, working when he discovered the truth. It sounds so virtuous—working while others are playing, but it isn't. The older son should've been in the picture throughout this parable. He should've tried to keep his brother from leaving, and he should have tried to protect his dad's honor. He did neither. He's busy. He's working. His only concern was his own honor and property.

The older brother was enraged though. Not setting foot in the home, his father came out to him. Bitter and condescending, he said to his dad: “Look! These many years I have served you... yet you never gave me a young goat... but when *this* son of yours came... you killed the fattened calf for him!” (Lk 15:29-30). *I worked hard, and he received! What's wrong with you?!* The father hadn't been unjust to his older son, but being gracious to the younger, the older despised him.

The father pleaded: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours... your brother was dead, and is alive. He was lost, and is found” (Lk 15:32). The father felt like he had received his boy back from the dead. It was reason to rejoice, but the older son would have none of it. Jesus ended the parable right here, on a cliffhanger.

We want to know what happened. *Did the older brother ever soften? Did he accept his younger brother?* I'd like to say so, but the older son pictures the religious leaders. Do you want to know how the story ends? It ends like this: Burning with hatred, the older son attacked and killed his dad. It's what the religious leaders did to the Son of God. Grace after grace was offered, but they wouldn't have it.