

The Parable of Jesus: The Father's Faithful, Patient, and Forgiving Heart
Luke 15:11-32

Today, as we follow Jesus Christ's journey to the Cross, we must understand our Father's heart not only for us but also for the lost in the world. Our Father's compassionate heart is clearly revealed in the parable we just read together.

NIV titles the story "**The Parable of the Lost Son.**" However, it didn't include the older brother in the story. Both the younger and older brothers are the objects of the father's focus of interest, patience, love, and forgiveness. So, NRSVU has this title, "**The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother.**" These titles raise important questions: What does this parable teach us? Who is the main character in the parable? I think it's the father. It teaches us about the father's heart - his faithful, patient, forgiving, and abundant heart for his sons - one who is lost and comes back and the other who is lost, too, although he has been with his father. So, I think the title of the story should be "**The Parable of the Father's Faithful, Patient, and Forgiving Heart for His Lost Sons.**"

Let us dive into the parable.

The first part of the parable starts with the younger son's culturally unacceptable request to his father. "**Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.**" (Luke 15:12 NRSV). In Israel's group-oriented and honor and shame culture, land will be divided and given to children when their father passes away. Also, if you receive land from your father, it entails your commitment and care for your parents until their passing. Thus, the younger brother's request is unthinkable, unacceptable, and very rude, shattering not only his father's honor but also his whole family's reputation in the community.

He sells everything he has received from his father and moves to a distant foreign land. He doesn't care about his identity as God's covenant servant. He lives in the gentile land. Although he might think he finds freedom away from his father, family, and community, he is actually entangled with his sins, losing his identity as God's covenant servant and his father's beloved son, dissipating all he has from his father.

A great famine sweeps over the land. He begins to starve and finds a job feeding pigs in the fields. For the Jews, pigs were considered unclean. He is not able to pay attention to the concept of clean and unclean before God. Tending pigs was one of the most degrading jobs possible. No one takes care of him, and he is not able to take care of himself or even his job. He was broke, hungry, and lonely. He

is away not only from his father, family, and home community but also from God and even from himself. He is a sinner.

All of a sudden, we don't know why, but something heavy pounds his heart: "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" (Luke 15:17-19 NRSV)

In his trials and brokenness, he is humbled and repentant and comes to realize who he is and what he had in his father's house. God uses trials to search our hearts and reveal hidden sins. So he returns home to his father. Let us read the Scripture on the screen: "While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20 NRSV)

The father is out there already. Why? He has been waiting for his son since he left home. Then, we can guess that the father has prayed for his lost son, which helps him have the repentant heart and come back home.

"Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Romans 8:34 NRSV).

He sees his son coming home first. When the father recognizes his son, he is filled with compassion. In the Bible, if you see the word "compassion," you will see specific actions of the person who has compassion after the word. He runs and puts his arms around him and kisses him. He doesn't care at all about his dignity. It is likely that he wears a long, flowing robe, as this was the customary attire for men of status in ancient Jewish culture. But he doesn't hesitate to break the custom and raises his robe to run to his son.

The younger son tries to tell his father the words that he has practiced. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (Luke 15:21 NRSV). However, he is not able to finish it because he is interrupted by his father's command to his slaves. His confession of sins is enough.

If I were the father, I would ask the son, "What happened to you? Why are you wearing ragged clothes? What happened to the money from selling the land I gave you?" Also, I would blame him, "Is this what you want? I knew what would happen to you. After losing everything, you come back to me, but there is nothing

left for you. I already gave you your portion. If you want to stay with me, you better behave now. I hope that you learn a lesson from your stupid decision.”

But, the father didn't even blame him at all. Instead, he said, “**Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!**” And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:22-24 NRSV)

For most of his life, Henri Nouwen had struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. He always prayed, worked for others, and read the Scriptures to avoid temptations. However, he failed many times but always tried again. Then he learned this: “**Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time, God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not “How am I to find God?” but “How am I to let myself be found by him?” The question is not “How am I to know God?” but “How am I to let myself be known by God?” And, finally, the question is not “How am I to love God?” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?” God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.**” Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1994), 106. Remember that “**You Are the Beloved.**”

The elder son returns from his work in the field and hears music and dancing from his house. He learns that his father has cast a community party for his younger brother. He is now so angry and refuses to go in. His father comes out and begs him. The father always comes out first to meet his sons and invite them to his house.

The elder son says, “**Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when **this son of yours** came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!**” (Luke 15:28-30 NRSV)

He is so rude. He shows his attitude toward his father by saying, “**Listen.**” He even calls his brother “**this son of yours.**” From his words, he expresses his arrogance and self-righteousness. But he feels that he has been treated as a slave by his father. This son treats his father very shamefully. He doesn't realize and appreciate his true identity as the father's beloved son. He is not any better than his younger brother. He rejects his father, which means his rejection of his whole family and community. As a self-righteous person, he is not able to see the grace and mercy from his father as his father begs him to join the welcoming party. He is not able to extend his grace to his brother, although he seems to know his brother's situation. “**He has devoured your assets with prostitutes**”

(Luke 15:30). If he knew his brother's situation, his father might have known before he knew. Maybe it was his father who shared the younger brother's situation with the older brother.

The elder son's comments pierce his father's heart. They are so sharp. The father might feel humiliated. However, he shows his faithful, patient, and forgiving love to his elder son as he did to his younger son. **“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”** (Luke 15:31-32 NRSV)

The elder brother is also broke, hungry, and lonely spiritually and emotionally. He has been in his father's abundance, but he hasn't been able to enjoy it. It is because of his self-righteous and legalistic attitude toward his father, his brother, and his life like the Pharisees and Scribes who felt superior to the tax collectors and other sinners. They were all there as Jesus' audience as they were taught this parable.

We do not know if the elder son joins the celebration. This invites us to reflect on ourselves. Do you recognize the depth of your Heavenly Father's love for you—his faithful, patient, and forgiving love? Are you prepared to extend that love to those you have not forgiven? Please take a moment to think about it.