

Luke 15:11 – 32

¹ Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near him to listen to him. ² Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' ³ So he told them this parable, saying... ¹¹ 'A man had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. ¹³ And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. ¹⁴ Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; ²³ and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ 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.'"

Questions

1. Cultural background info:
 - a. The younger son basically told the father to die. Inheritance wasn't given until the father was dead.
 - b. The older son had a responsibility to step in to mediate, but failed to do so. He took his inheritance as well. He had his hands out...
 - c. The father could have had his younger son stoned to death for insolence and disrespect.
2. Now read the story of the younger son and the father, v.11 – 24
 - a. What is the younger son throwing away?
 - b. Note: What does it mean that the older son does not step in to mediate the conflict? The older son had a responsibility according to the culture of his time to step in and try to resolve the conflict. It's not proper for a son to fight with his father, and so the rest of the family, namely this older son, was supposed to become a mediator. But what did he do? Nothing. Apparently, he just stood by while the father took everything he had and gave it over to his sons. The younger son pockets his share, and the older son stretches out his hands, too. The younger son committed the active sin, saying that he wished his father was dead. But the older son committed the passive sin, standing by being aloof, wearing a long face while he also took what he wanted. He rejected his father too. It's subtle, but it's there.
 - c. What does it mean that the father does not immediately and severely punish the son? Both sons? Either he is the wimpiest father on the face of the earth, or he's insane, or his love for his son runs so deep that even when there is no changing his son's mind, he wants his last act to be an act of kindness; he wants his son to remember that the last look on his face was a look of sheer love.
 - d. Who does the Jewish younger son depend on? A Gentile. What animal does he feed? Pigs.
 - e. What is poetically grotesque about what the Jewish younger son does for work?
 - f. In a famine, pigs are more important than people.
 - g. Could the younger son be saying, "I guess what goes around comes around."
 - h. Compare what the younger son gave up vs. where he is now.
 - i. How does he plan to get back to his father?
 - j. Is it hard to say, "I have sinned"?
 - k. What else could the younger son have blamed? The weather, his untrustworthy friends?
 - l. Jesus says "when he came to his senses." Literally in Greek it is "but having come to himself." In the Bible, the person who comes to herself or himself is the person who realizes who they really are, and what they've really done, and how much they really need forgiveness and a chance to start life over with God at the very center of life. Why do we think "finding yourself" is about running away and throwing off all restraints and indulging yourself?
 - m. What were the younger son's last words to his father? Can he hope to be a son again? The best he can hope for is to be hired as a servant and rent a room and be treated as a second class citizen. That is not humility. That is the best possible case. Notice that he thinks he can work his way back into being accepted. An amazing thought considering the insult he's dealt his father.
 - n. What was the last expression he saw on his father's face?
 - o. If the father sees him while he's still a speck on the horizon, what does that mean about his father's eagerness to see him?
 - p. It's amazing that the father 'felt compassion.' I think most of us would have 'felt conflicted.' Could the father increase the distance between himself and his son by marching back into the house and closing the door? Why would that have been a reasonable response?
 - q. How does the father close the distance between himself and his son?
 - r. Note: Why does the father run? Because of his joy and love, true. Also, because he knows what would happen to the son. Bailey says that the son will probably be mocked by a crowd from the community. As soon as he's close enough to be recognized, he'll be slandered by the whole town, and a mob will gather on either side of the road back to the house. As the son walks back with his head down, he'll have all kinds of nasty things said at him. They might even throw stones or push him... He'll run a gauntlet to get home. So the father looks at the rest of the village and knows the rejection and shame his son will face at the hands of a mob like that. What the father does in the homecoming is to protect that boy.

- s. Note: What does an old man running look like? How socially acceptable was that? In the Middle East or the Orient, a nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating. Ben Sirach said, “A man’s manner of walking tells you who he is.” Aristotle said, “Great men never run in public.” But what this father does is surely pick up his robes in public, bares his legs in public, and runs in public. He draws all the attention to himself in the most self-humiliating thing a dignified man could do. He runs. All his neighbors must have said, “What is going on?” This father runs the gauntlet that his son should have run. He takes all the shame on himself.
 - t. The younger son was hoping to see pity on his father’s face. What does he see?
 - u. What are the five action verbs the father does? What does that tell us?
 - v. When the son does speak, how does it compare with that he had rehearsed?
 - w. What does the father order for the son? The robe is the father’s own robe. The family ring enables the son to do business for the father. Sandals mean that he is higher than the barefoot servants. He is an honored son of the family. What does the fattened calf mean? The best veal! A rare meal.
 - x. Why is the father so publicly joyful?
 - y. Note: It may interest you to know that there is a Buddhist story much like this. A son leaves his father, shames his father, and then comes back home. He asks to be made a paid servant in his father’s house, and his father accepts. He is not restored to full membership in the family because the father wants to test his loyalty. Tell me if that wouldn’t be a justifiable thing for the father to do? But will this father act the same way?
3. Now read the story of the older son and the father, v.25 – 32
- a. What indications of the older brother’s character have we had so far?
 - b. Did he share in his father’s hurt over the departure of the younger son?
 - c. Did he share in his father’s inheritance when he distributed it?
 - d. Does he have the right to be angry? He hasn’t talked to his father. He hasn’t heard how his younger brother came back.
 - e. How many assumptions has he made about the situation?
 - f. What does it mean to publicly disagree with his father in front of guests?
 - g. Might it be a reasonable response for the father to order him inside and beat him later? What does the father do instead? What does that show about him?
 - h. In his speech, how many times does the older son say “I” or “me” or “my”? What does that mean about him?
 - i. What duty does the older son accuse the father of failing in?
 - j. What duty does the older son keep failing in?
 - k. Reflect: I might have said: “Listen, you spoiled brat, who pays for your clothes, your rent, your food, your bed, and the roof over your head? If I pay you a salary, you pay me for everything!” But the father doesn’t say that at all. He could have won the argument easily. But even after this extreme public insult, the father swallows the humiliation and reaches out in love to this angry son. “Dear child.” Then he reminds him, “You’re more than a servant. You are a full heir of my house, if you don’t reject it.” Verse 31: “You have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.” That’s the outrageous thing about this older son. He is a full son, but he wants to be just a hired field worker.
 - l. How does the father try to reunite his family? By saying ‘this brother of yours.’
 - m. Who is dead to the father?
 - n. What does it mean to be lost and dead? Found and alive?
 - o. The father is perhaps a bit repetitious with the older son. Because this older son is also dead and lost. He also needs to recognize how much his father loves him. The father knew about this rejection, even before it was made visible in public. Nevertheless, the father is doing everything he can to be merciful to this older son, to be gentle, and to show him publicly how much he respects him.
 - p. Then, the story ends. What happens? We don’t know.
4. Jump back out to what was going on with Jesus in v.1 – 2.
- a. Who does Jesus want to finish the story?
 - b. Who is at the table with Jesus? Sinners and tax-collectors. Younger brother types.
 - c. Who is outside of the house refusing table fellowship? The Pharisees. Older brother types.

- d. Who has been lost and is now found, beginning to live? Those at the table.
 - e. Who is still lost and dead? Those outside the house, not at the table.
 - f. How would the Pharisees have completed the story?
 - g. Note: What would make it complete? Compare the older son's central points to the younger son's central points. That corresponds to the final response of both sons. The younger son returns to the father, but the older son does not.
5. What have we learned about the father?
- a. He does not seem to have one ounce of self-preservation in him.
 - b. He does not feel 'conflicted.' He feels compassion.
 - c. He bends all reality around his compassion. The central question is whether we share in the father's joy or not.
 - d. State: We need to understand how joyful God is. He doesn't care about His 'honor' or 'public shame.' We often care about those things on God's behalf even though God doesn't actually feel it! We really care about those things on our own behalf, and it's selfish.

Literary Structure: Chiasm

1. There was a man who had two sons and the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that falls to me." And he divided his living between them.	A son is lost
2. Not many days later the younger son sold all he had, journeyed to a far country and wasted his property in loose living.	Goods wasted in loose living
3. And when he had spent everything a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want.	Everything lost
4. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country and he sent him to his fields to feed pigs.	Clings to a stranger
5. And he would gladly have eaten the pods which the pigs ate and no one gave him anything.	Total rejection
6. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's servants have bread to spare but I perish here with hunger.	Self-recognition 1 I am perishing
6. I will arise and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son; make me a servant.'"	Self-recognition 2 I have sinned
5'. And he arose and came to his father. And while he was at a great distance his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.	Total acceptance
4'. And the son said to the father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son."	Clings to his father
3' And the father said to the servants, "Bring the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hands and shoes on his feet.	Everything restored
2'. And bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and make merry	Goods used in celebration
1'. for this son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found." And they began to make merry.	A son is found

Literary Structure: Chiasm

1. Now the elder son was in the fields, and as he came and drew near to the house he heard music and dancing and he called one of the boys and asked what this meant.	Older brother outside
2. And he said to him, “Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he received him with peace.”	Your brother safe A feast
3. But he was angry and refused to go in so his father came out and was entreating him.	Father entreats
4. But he answered his father, “Lo these many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your commandments yet you never gave me a kid to make merry with my friends.	Complaint 1: You don’t pay me
4’. But this son of yours came who has devoured your living with harlots you killed for him the fatted calf.”	Complaint 2: You bless him
3’. And he said to him, “Beloved son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.	Father entreats
2’. It was fitting to make merry and be glad for this your brother was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found.”	A feast Your brother safe
[1’. And he remained outside at the door of the house refusing the music and dancing and rejecting not only his brother, but his father as well.]	Older brother outside