

ENCOUNTER THE FATHER

Jesus Teaches the Father's Heart for the Lost

Luke 15:1-2; 11-32

Key Verse: 15:32

"But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

This passage is one of the most famous in the Bible. It has been called the parable of the prodigal son, or the parable of the lost son. However, based on the contents of the teaching, a better title would be "The Father's Heart for the Lost." For this is the main point of Jesus' story. Jesus told this parable primarily to the Pharisees. They were very unhappy that many so-called public sinners had gathered around Jesus, and they muttered against him (1-2). They thought public sinners should be segregated to protect Jewish society. Their idea was actually rooted in Scripture. But the problem was that they did not know God's heart. Without knowing God's heart for the lost, they were judging and condemning them. So Jesus told them a poignant story to help them truly understand God's heart.

We can understand the religious leaders. Through Bible study we learn many valuable lessons we want to apply for our own spiritual growth and to bless others. However, knowledge can make us proud and critical. Then we can easily judge others, assuming we speak on God's behalf. There is a renowned contemporary Christian leader. He has written many excellent books and Bible study materials. However, when a coworker in his ministry began to embrace Catholic and Orthodox brothers who simply believed in Jesus, this leader cast him out and blacklisted him. In the Christian church, there has been a tendency to discriminate based on doctrinal distinctives. There has also been discrimination toward those who belonged to the Communist party, those who had a different skin color, or those living an alternative lifestyle. If we go further back in history, we can find the sad story of witch hunts. Further back still, there was the Inquisition. The tendency to criticize and judge others and then ostracize them has plagued the Christian church throughout its history; it still does in our time. This is why Jesus' parable speaks to us today. He wants us to know God's heart. This is the best remedy to heal our critical spirit. When we know God's heart we can be happy and be a blessing to others.

Today I want to consider this parable in three parts, each part focusing on one of the main characters: the youngest son, the father, and the oldest son. Most of all, let's learn the father's heart.

First, the youngest son: a redemption story (11-20a). Jesus began: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them." In any family, there are certain dynamics which contribute to the growth and development of children. In a family of two sons, one older and the other younger, the older son is usually responsible, loyal, faithful and hardworking, while the younger son is more relational, lovely, playful, and tends to be somewhat irresponsible and spoiled. The events of this story seem to indicate such a tendency, as the younger son made a shocking demand on his father. In Jewish society, oldest sons were rightful heirs of the estate, entitled to a double portion (Dt 21:17). A younger son would be entitled to one-third of the estate. This is what the younger son asked for. The problem was that his father had not died yet. So his request was tantamount to saying, "Father, let's assume you have died and your estate is being divided. Give me my share and send me on my way." This was not only rude, it was unethical and unlawful; it could have been punished by stoning.

Why would the youngest son have done this? We can only imagine. But it seems likely that he was not happy with his position in his family. He was probably tired of his older brother bossing him around, and of listening to his father say, "clean your room...do your homework...read the Torah... practice your instrument." He was tired of having his computer time restricted, his cell phone monitored, and a curfew. He wanted to go on romantic dates and watch the sun come up over the ocean waves in the early morning. He wanted to watch the Super Bowl in person, flying into the host city and arriving in a chauffeur-driven limousine. He wanted to be free to enjoy his life in the way he thought best. He wanted to sample the pleasures of the world. In truth, his decision to leave home

with his share of the inheritance was to please his sinful nature. This desire was so strong that he did not mind breaking his relationship with his father.

When we are young, we each have a decision to make in setting our direction of life. What it boils down to is whether we will live to please ourselves or to please God. The decision to please ourselves may look as audacious as that of the spoiled rich kid in this passage. Or it may take a much more subtle tone. We should know that it is God who has given us the blessings and privileges we enjoy. God gave us life, our parents, talents and abilities, opportunities and privileges. God has a clear purpose for our lives and he wants to prepare and use us according to that purpose. But many young people totally ignore God's purpose for them. Instead, they use all of their God-given wealth for their own glory, honor and pleasure. They may not intend to, but in doing so they break their relationship with their Father God as abruptly and rudely as the youngest son in this passage.

The younger son must have let out a whoop of excited anticipation. He got what he had always wanted and now was his chance to live as he pleased. He packed up all his possessions and moved to a distant country. Perhaps it was like Las Vegas or Monte Carlo. He bought a fancy sports car, rented rooms in the luxurious hotels, enjoyed gourmet food and fine wine, and treated himself to the best shows, sporting events and parties he could find. He was surrounded by instant friends who flattered him. What this naïve young man did not realize was that he was being taken advantage of in many ways. One day he woke up to find that his checking account was overdrawn, his sports car had been repossessed, and the hotel manager was tossing him out into the street. To make matters worse, a severe famine came over the land and everyone became selfish and indifferent. Those who had enjoyed his parties all turned a cold shoulder to him. For the first time in his life he began to know what it was like to be "in need." He tasted the pain of real hunger. He had to get a job. But the only one he could find was a pig-feeding job. To a Jewish boy, working for a Gentile boss as a pig feeder was the ultimate humiliation. This was the outcome of living for his sinful nature.

The book, "Out of a Far Country," tells the story of a modern prodigal son: Christopher Yuan. He was born in America to Chinese immigrant parents. His father is a successful dentist and Christopher seemed to follow in his steps. But there was another side to Christopher's life. Throughout his growing years, he had been ridiculed for being Chinese, for loving music and the arts, and for not being good at sports. For various reasons, his parents could not understand him. In his loneliness, Christopher stepped into the gay community. Immediately he found unconditional acceptance, support and friendship he had not known before. He embraced this new life and left his family and dental career behind, breaking his parents' hearts. Soon, he got involved in drug trafficking and became very successful. He made easy money, became friends with movie stars and GQ models, and enjoyed the hottest parties in America. But this all ended abruptly when he was busted for selling drugs and sentenced to 12 years in prison. Shortly after incarceration, he found out that he was HIV positive. He, like the prodigal son, came to the point of utter ruin when he lived by his sinful nature. We will come back to his story later.

Verse 17 tells us that in that desperate situation, the prodigal son "came to his senses." His fanciful dreams came crashing down and broke against the shore of hard reality, and he began to consider what was really true. He realized that his decision was foolish and there were serious consequences for it. Most of all, he was really, really hungry. Then he remembered his father's house and how even hired servants ate well. He began to see his father as a good manager and a humanitarian employer. For the first time, he began to respect his father. The young man also found himself as a sinner. He realized that his willful rebellion was not just against his father; it was against God. Now his sense of entitlement was gone. He knew he was unworthy of the honor of being his father's son. The younger son did not rationalize or make excuses. He did not wallow in his sin. He simply got up and went to his father, acknowledging his sin. What do we learn from him? Simply this: living according to our sinful nature leads to utter ruin, yet in that situation we can get up and go back to our Father God.

Second, the father: unconditional and lavish love (20b-24). In considering the father, let's back up and review his treatment of his younger son from the beginning. When his son demanded his share of the estate, the father gave it to him. The father knew that his son would make a very foolish mistake with the money he received. But he did not rebuke his son. He did not use the law to prohibit his son. He did not break their relationship, even though he must have felt greatly offended. Rather, he gave his son what he wanted. He was willing to let his son fail

miserably. He was willing to lose a huge amount of money. Here we learn the wisdom of the father. He foresaw that the only way to help his son was through humiliating failure. Only then would he learn basic respect for his father. Only then could the father have a true love relationship with his son.

When we compare this father to God, we can find that God deals with stubborn sinners in this wisdom. Though he knows we will fail miserably, he gives us over to the sinful desire of our hearts to do the things we really want to do (Ro 1:24,26,28). He lets us experience the awful consequences of foolish decisions so that we may learn truth the hard way. Some call this “tough love.” This is easy to say, but it is not easy to practice. When my first son was born, the Holy Spirit inspired me with Acts 13:22 and I named him David, with the prayer that he would be a shepherd and a man after God’s own heart. He is very artistic, intelligent, articulate and warm-hearted. Once, he played the role of the prodigal son in the HBF drama. His performance was so inspiring that he won an HBF academy award. I had hope for him to follow me into ministry. I had expectations, but I did not understand him very well. I did not communicate with him well. In truth, he was very lonely. During his high school years he began to find comfort in gay friends. And one day, he sent me a message through someone that he was going to pursue a gay lifestyle. It meant that even if our relationship was broken, he was going to go his own way. It is hard to describe the pain that I experienced. It felt like a knife pierced my heart and stayed there. For the next two years, I grieved over him constantly, until the Lord comforted my soul. What I am describing is simply the pain of separation. Any parent who has watched their adult child walk away to live in their own way has felt this same pain. Genesis tells us that when men abandoned God to live for their flesh desire only, God’s heart was filled with pain. Moreover, God the Holy and Almighty One, is provoked to anger every moment by people’s stubborn rebellion. He could destroy them in an instant if he chose to do so. But he restrains himself and lets them go. He does not slam the door behind us as we go out; but he leaves the door open. He suffers patiently while the prodigal ones experience their season of sin. We should not presume upon God’s patience. Rather, recognizing his patience should lead us to repentance, as Paul warns in Romans 2:4. The father’s longsuffering patience bore fruit.

Look at verse 20b. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Here Jesus gives us a window into the heart of God. The father saw his son from a distance. It means that he was constantly looking for him. When God gives someone over to a season of sin, he does not just forget about that person. He waits with eager anticipation for their return. In Genesis, we learn that God waited for Jacob for twenty years. And when Jacob returned, while he was still some distance away, God met him with angels to welcome him (Gen 32:1). God waits eagerly for our return.

Secondly, the father was “filled with compassion” for his son. This means that he felt his son’s pain as though it was his own. He knew that his son was ashamed of his failure and nervous about acceptance. The father knew his son’s trembling heart as he put one step in front of another to make his way home. And the nearer the house he came, the more difficult the steps were. If the father had seen this event with a sense of justice, he might have thought, “Did you learn your lesson? You must work hard to repay every penny you squandered.” But the father did not act in this event out of his justice. He acted out of compassion. Usually those who have power do not understand the vulnerability of those who are weak. But our Father God understands us when we come to him in our brokenness. It was said of Jesus, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory” (Mt 9:20).

Out of his deep compassion, the father ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. This was a demonstration of the father’s love and full acceptance of his son. The father did not want any gap between them, but to have an intimate heart-to-heart love relationship. The Bible tells us that God demonstrated his love for us by sending his one and only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins on the cross (Ro 5:8). God lavished his love on us by pouring out the lifeblood of the holy Son of God (1 Jn 3:1). And through Jesus, the Father pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts to express his intimate personal love for us (Ro 5:5). When we come to God with our sins, failures and mistakes, he wipes our tears, binds up our wounds, and fills our hearts with his love.

Look at verses 21-22. The son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Perhaps he wanted to say more. But the father stopped him and instructed the servants: “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” The father clothed

his penitent son with honor and dignity and the sign of his authority as a son. There was no probationary period. But the moment the father met the son he restored him to the full rights and privileges of a son. When we come to God and confess to him, he receives us. He clothes us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ and proclaims us to be his beloved children who are to be treated with dignity and respect (Gal 4:4-7). As his children, we have the right to come to God any time to listen to him and ask his wisdom, to receive strength and help from him, and to find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16). We have full authority to live in this world as his stewards and to do his work freely without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (Lk 1:75). We all know the story of the Samaritan woman. She accepted Jesus as her true husband and received the living water of eternal life. As soon as she did so, she began to testify about Jesus to her townspeople. On the basis of her testimony they came to Jesus and met him personally. She had become an ambassador of Christ, a daughter of God who worked for his glory and honor. There was a demon-possessed man whom Jesus healed with his words. As soon as this man was healed, he wanted to go with Jesus as one of his disciples. But Jesus did not let him. Jesus sent him immediately to testify about his grace to his townspeople. Jesus made him an evangelist for one region as his personal representative.

Look at verse 23. The father celebrated his son's return with a feast. In doing so, he spared no expense. He had a fattened calf slaughtered and prepared the best that he could offer. Then he invited his friends and neighbors to come and share his joy. In that household and community, joy was overflowing. It was because the lost son was found and restored to his father (24). In the same way, God rejoices and heaven celebrates when one sinner repents and comes back to God. When we share God's heart, we can also share his joy. There is a man who has been my Bible student for about 20 years. Due to a drug problem he has been in and out of jail. One time, on hearing that he was arrested, Dr. Samuel Lee immediately decided to visit this man, even though he had caused some trouble by his behavior. After the visit, when we returned to the center, suddenly a great joy filled my heart. It was a joy that came from heaven. God was pleased that we had visited his lost one and he poured out his joy into our hearts. To taste this joy even one time is worth much suffering. It is God's joy over a restored soul. When we share God's mission to save the lost, he shares his joy with us.

Let's finish the story of Christopher Yuan. Shortly after he announced his decision to live a gay lifestyle, his mother sought help from a priest, heard the gospel message and accepted Christ as her personal Savior and Lord. She began to pray for him every morning with the spirit of a true tiger mom. Her prayer topic was that no matter how much he suffered, that her son would repent his sins and accept Christ as his Savior. One day, while in prison, Christopher happened to find a Gideon's Bible on the top of a heap of garbage. He picked it up and started reading. As he did, the Holy Spirit convicted him of his sin of rebellion, selfishness and pride. After struggling for a while, he surrendered his life to Christ. He began to read the Bible every day and to pray. He shared his experience with other prisoners. Then God began to help him in many ways. In a series of miracles, he had his prison sentence reduced by more than half. He graduated from Moody Bible Institute and then Wheaton Graduate School. He has been sharing his testimony with many. Joy is overflowing in his family. Joy is overflowing in his community. It is God's joy of the return of one lost person to him.

Third, the oldest son: the tragedy of not knowing the father's heart (25-32). There was one person who did not share the joy of celebration. It was the oldest son. On finding out the purpose of the party, he became angry and refused to go in. He stood outside with a hardened heart, his blood boiling hotter by the moment. When his father humbly pleaded with him to come in, he expressed the reason for his anger. He thought his father was unfair for throwing a big party for the younger son. When we examine his words closely, we can find what his problem was. He did not think of his father as a father, but as a master. He did not think of himself as a son, but as a slave who had to earn a reward through hard work and outward obedience. He did not think of his younger brother as a brother, but a competitor for his father's love. In a word, he did not share the father's heart. So, at a time he could have been overjoyed, he was so miserable that he wanted to break all of his family relationships.

How did the father react to the older son's bitter cry? He said to him, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." The father embraced him as a son and assured him of his love and membership in the family. He loved his older son with the full measure of his love, just as he did the younger son. Though the

older son was thinking about a goat, the father shared his entire estate with him as an equal partner. And the father reminded his older son that his younger brother was also a dear family member. The father wanted his older son to share his joy. And that is where the passage ends. We are left with a question: Did the older son join his father or not? I believe Jesus ended this way intentionally to invite each of us to write the ending to this story based on our own response.

As we have studied this passage, most of us have tried to find ourselves in either the younger son, or the older son. I can find myself in both. In my late teens I rebelled against my father's wise guidance to focus on school studies and went my own way. I moved out of his house and got my own apartment, bought a fancy new sports car, and began to date girls until I got deeply involved with one. For 18 months I lived in this way, according to my sinful desires. At the end of that time I had a broken heart, an empty bank account and was filled with guilt and shame. At that time, the Lord sent Pastor Abraham Kim to be my shepherd. Through Mark's gospel study with him I learned of the heavenly Father's love and could come back to him and start a new life as his servant. At that time the joy of heaven overflowed in my soul and in many others because of God's grace to me. However, as I have served the Lord over the years, I find that from time to time I struggle with the older son's mentality. I received a lot of difficult training to be a full-time staff shepherd and eventually become the director of Chicago UBF. I learned from Dr. Samuel Lee was his gospel faith, love for God's word, and hardworking spirit, among other things. I want all of our staff members to learn this as well. But I could not find many who were willing to do so. When I see those who seem to live without much passion, I want to rebuke them. Sometimes it is good to do so. But I should not do so with a sense of the older brother's self-righteousness. I must pray and practice the grace of Jesus, remembering his grace to me. I must guard against the mentality of the older son.

Most of all, however, I am learning the heart of our Father God. As I mentioned earlier, my oldest son David has been like a prodigal son to me. One night in particular I struggled all night with heartbreaking pain as I realized that he was lost. I was inconsolable. But that night was a Saturday night and I had to deliver the Sunday message the next day from Romans 8. As I struggled, the Lord spoke to my heart through 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things." The Lord helped me to relate my own pain to his pain as he sent Jesus into the world to save sinners. For the first time, I began to realize how much our Heavenly Father suffered to send Jesus to us. I could realize how much God loves me, and my heart was greatly comforted. Since then I could pray for my son with hope. The Lord also opened my heart to realize how much he loves all of his children. I began to see all young UBF members like my own children. A few years ago, I was at "YDC" to pray for attendants. As soon as the praise music started I was overwhelmed with sorrow to realize that my own son, who was the same age as the other attendants, was not there. At that moment I wanted to run out of the conference. But the Lord touched my heart again as though to say, "Do you see all of these young people. They are my children. I love them. I want you to love them too. Stop thinking of yourself and spend your strength to love my children." So I have tried to do so. Then a remarkable thing began to happen. The love of God and joy of God over his children began to grow in my heart. I am happy, even though I have many struggles.

In this passage we have learned what makes our Father God joyful. It is the return of a lost soul to him through sincere repentance. For this, God works hard and sacrifices everything, and he invites his servants to share his heart and his ministry and his joy. These days we live in a nation of prodigal children. There are so many who have grown up in Christian homes and who know the love of good parents. But they have departed, often with bitterness, seeking the pleasures that this world has to offer. They have tasted the hard reality of the world. Now they want to come back. Our Father wants to bring them back even at great cost. We can share in his mission by practicing the love of God and teaching the word of God to those he puts in our way. As we do, our Father will share his joy with us. God's joy is beyond comparison to anything in this world. Learning the father's heart by bringing back the lost is the most meaningful and joyful way of life. Let's participate in his mission and learn his heart. May God richly bless you!