

24 July 2016

**The Rotten, Ungrateful Son**  
Luke 15:1-32

We read from Luke 15, verses 1-12:

*Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*

*So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'*

*Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. . .'*

*Younger Son:* I couldn't believe it. I was half joking when I proposed it, and the other half just trying to get under his skin. He had called me in to give me another of those long-faced, disappointed parental talks about how Bro and I could work together so much better than we do, if only we'd meet each other half way and respect and blah blah and cooperation-something and I guess I tuned it out after a while. I've heard it all before, along with the one that he and Bro do as a duet about responsibility and hard work and caring for the farm and blah blah and something about duty to the people who depend on us. Like responsibility ever did them any good. When was the last time either of them had a vacation? I don't think Bro would even if he could, on account of being the most boring person alive. So I said, "Look, since we can't work together, why don't you just divide the property and let us each have half?"

And he said, "All right. If that's what you want." I knew Dad was stupid – I mean, he chose to be a farmer – but I didn't know he was crazy. But that's not my problem. I had him put it in writing.

*Older Son:* When we were younger, I used to take him out to the fields with me. He'd generally play in the ditches while I worked, but I'd talk to him about the farm and how one day we'd make this the finest farm in Iowa. I'd manage the fields, and he'd manage . . . the books maybe, or sales, or . . . well, the truth is, even then I had trouble imagining the useful thing he'd do. I certainly never stumbled on the thing he's work at, and it just got worse as he got older. Dad and I kept trying to give him a little more responsibility, so that he'd feel more ownership in the farm, but the more we asked of him, the lazier he got. At first I tried to help him out, or at least cover for him. I'd go check his jobs and, when I saw they hadn't been done – heck, hadn't even been started – I'd do them for him, so Dad wouldn't know his youngest son was a loaf. But I

stopped doing that. You can't hide useless forever, and the Kid is about as useless a human being as I've ever known. I guess Dad never figured that out.

*You did what? Half the property? Have you lost your mind? You don't think he's actually going to work those fields, do you? Unless . . . did you put in a clause saying that couldn't sell the . . . you didn't, did you? You know that's what he's going to do, don't you? He'll sell it to the first bidder, take the money, and run. And then what do we do? What about our hired men? We hired them to work all the farm, not one half its size. Which ones do you want to lay off? You want to tell their families, or will the Kid do it? Dad, what have you done?*

Luke 15:13:

*A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.*

*Younger Son:* It took me a couple of weeks to find a buyer. Not as much as I'd hoped, and I maybe could have gotten more if I'd kept it on the market for a while, but I had to get out, so I took what was offered and I was out of there. As far out of there as I could get – I'm talking Caribbean! *And when I reached Jamaica, I made a stop. Now I'm sad to say, I'm on my way. I won't be back for many a day . . .* Do you know, except for the Red Roof Inn in Des Moines during the state fair, I'd never even stayed in a hotel? Or eaten Lobster Thermidor? So I took a suite at a resort in Wilkes Bay to start with. Then I had to move to town, because the resort didn't have docking facilities for my yacht – not one of those wussy catamaran things. I mean *yacht!* It was only another twenty thousand to get the one with the hot tub on the deck, so I did that, too. Now *those* were some parties! I lost track of how many swimsuit models I had out to the boat, but it's not like it's my fault – they're all named Ashley anyway. I sent Bro one postcard – from Bimini, I think – but didn't have time to write much. I had an Ashley waiting at the beach.

*Older Son:* He wasn't worth much, but without him things were harder. I had sometimes dreamed about one day running the farm without him in the way, but that was when we still had the whole farm. I refused to lay off any of our workers, but we couldn't pay them the same on the income from half of the farm, either. So I met with them. They all took a pay cut, and I gave up any income for me at all. We couldn't replace equipment, so we just had to repair and pray. We borrowed money, then worked in shifts. I left the fields and spent my days with payroll and balance sheets and borrowing from one account to pay off another and missing meals that we couldn't afford anyway. We tried new sources for cash income: U-pick berries, ginseng, fixing up the old barn for picturesque weddings, bees. For two years we just went deeper into debt, but then came a good year, and we broke even. Then another, and I began to dream about maybe in a few more years buying part of our land back.

Luke 15:14-16:

*When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.*

*Younger Son:* The money ran out. I guess . . . I guess if I'd thought about it I knew it would, but it was so much more than I'd ever had before, I thought I'd have more time. I hadn't even bought anything I could sell. The car was leased, and the boat . . . well, that got repossessed first. And then there weren't any

Ashleys, and there weren't any friends, and then Hurricane Oliver hit Jamaica, and everyone was broke. There weren't even any jobs. I ended up hiking back into the hills behind Kingston and getting a place keeping pigs – for room and board, if you can call it that. I slept in the barn and ate what the pigs left. Shoot, even Dad's hired men live better than that. I started thinking about that, about the homes where the hired men and their families back home lived better than that. Maybe Raul would let me stay with him; he was cool. At least there was always food there. *Day-O, me say Day-O! Daylight come, and me want to go home!*

I started home, practicing my speech. "Dad, I'm not fit to be called your son. But if you'd hire me on, I'd work really hard. Really. I'd be the hardest-working laborer you had." I begged my way off the island, hitched my way back to Iowa, then walked the last fifty miles. At the front gate, I stopped, rehearsing my speech, then looked up. Dad was running down the drive from the house. I started: "Dad, I'm not fit to be called your son –" and that was as far as I got. He threw himself on me, calling out my name. I couldn't have finished anyway.

Luke 15:17-24:

*But when he came to himself he said, "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.' " So he set off and went to his father. But 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. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "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.*

*Older Son:* I came in from the fields after dark. The problem with old machinery is that it breaks down, and it took all day for the right part to come in from town. Then we had to fix the combine. All in all, we spent all day and didn't even finish one field. I sent the men back to their families and walked home up the back lane. As I got closer, I heard music and saw lights. There was a party going on. At first I was excited. Maybe we'd inherited some money or something. Maybe we could pay off last year's debts. Then I saw one of the men waiting for me. "What's up?" I asked.

"Your brother's home."

I just stood there for a long time. "Is he . . . I mean, did he bring back . . ."

"Naw, he's broke. Your pa's throwing a party for him. Butchered the show calf."

I just stood there in dark. I wasn't going in. Dad even came out to beg me. "Can't you be happy? Your brother was lost, but he's home." But I couldn't do it. I just couldn't.

Luke 15:25-32:

*'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "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 property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “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.” ’*

It’s the most familiar parable of all, the Prodigal Son. It’s been told and retold, made into movies and comic books. If you only know one of Jesus’ parables, this is it. But that doesn’t mean we get it. Usually when we hear this parable, we sympathize with the poor, repentant younger son who throws himself on his father’s mercy and is forgiven. We see this parable as being about rescuing the lost, restoring the runaway, forgiving the unforgivable. And all that’s true. And if there’s anyone here in that position, someone who has left the Father and longs to return – this is the message of the parable for you: God is waiting to reach out and take you back and hold you close.

But we also usually condemn the older son as a tight, repressed, hypocritical, judgmental stiff. In the context of the parable, we associate him with the Pharisees, whom we have learned to despise. But you may have noticed that I was a little more sympathetic to the older brother than we usually are. I mean, give me a break, this is the guy who stayed. This is the one who had to pick up all the pieces that his brother with poor impulse control had left behind. This is the stable, trustworthy, hard-working one who thought of someone other than himself. I can’t condemn the older brother; I *am* the older brother. And so are most of you – you who got yourself out of bed on a Sunday morning in July to go to church.

And when he doesn’t join the party, I know why. He doesn’t believe the brother’s changed. He believes the Kid repents because he’s broke, and as soon as he has some pocket money, he’ll be as irresponsible as ever. And I think he’s probably right. Don’t you?

But that’s the point – the hard point of this parable. God doesn’t forgive us because we deserve it. God doesn’t love us with any ulterior motive – to *fix* us, for instance. God forgives us because it’s what God does. God loves us, because God *is* love. And that means that God loves some unworthy SOBs. God loves some rotten, ungrateful, manipulative narcissists. We may be the good sons and daughters, the trustworthy, hard-working ones, but God doesn’t love us any more because of that. God *can’t* love us any more: God already loves us with everything. God’s love isn’t based on who we are, but on who God is. It’s not about us.

So if God’s message to the rotten ungrateful son is “Come home; I’m waiting,” then God’s message to the rest of us is, “Stop worrying about who deserves what. You are loved. Come out of the dark, and join the party.”