

Luke 15:11-32

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Date: 15 July 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn to that passage in Luke's Gospel and chapter 15. Well, they may not have won the World Cup, but we have been assured over the past few weeks that it's coming home. And even though the World Cup was not won, its coming home did make it to the top of the charts. Again, apparently the fourth time for this musical masterpiece, making it to the coveted number one spot. So, you've heard the words probably more than you care to remember.

It's coming home. It's coming home. It's coming. I'll just leave it there. I won't take it any further. So, it is quite catchy, but what does it even mean, it's coming home? Well, if nothing else, this little ditty did get me thinking about coming home stories in the Bible. Indeed, as I was trying to think of maybe a suitable coming home story to preach about, it struck me, and it's not a particularly insightful observation, but it struck me that the big story of the Bible is a coming home story. The big story of the Bible is what God has done and is doing to bring us, sinners and rebels, home to Himself. So, the gospel story, the big story of redemption is a coming home story. But within the big story, there are a host of little coming home stories. And one of the most loved, certainly one of the most known coming home stories is the parable that we have read, the parable of the prodigal son, as it is normally described or known. And what's not to like in this parable? It's a heartwarming story. It is at heart a story of God's fatherly love, a love that we see is both powerful but tender. And so, we're drawn to this coming home story of the prodigal son who comes home into the embrace of his father. And as I hinted at when we read the passage, though the parable is invariably entitled the parable of the prodigal son, or as it is in our version of the Bible, the parable of the lost son, is actually a tale of two sons. And both, yes, both of the sons are far from home. Both are lost. Both are estranged. Both are rebels. But both are loved, deeply loved by their father who longs for both of his sons to come home. So, let's think about this coming home story and learn from it. Let's see who we identify with, who you identify with. Is it with the younger son, the younger brother, or perhaps the elder brother? Let's see if we recognize in this parable the love of the father. And let's ask ourselves the question, do we know what it is to be so loved as the sons describe for us in this parable? Well, it is a parable, and it's clear. It's not always clear in the case of the different parables that Jesus taught, but on this occasion, it is very clear who the characters represent. Indeed, the beginning of the chapter that introduces these three related parables makes that very explicit. Let's just read the beginning of the chapter that we didn't read when we read from verse 11. But notice what is said in verses 1 to 3, where beyond any doubt, we have clearly established who are those represented by the characters in the parable.

So, we read there at the beginning of the chapter, now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. But, so that's one group, but there's another group. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. So, very clearly, having been told who the audience were as the parable is being taught, it's clear that these two sons represent these two groups. So, the tax collectors and sinners are represented by the younger brother, and the Pharisees and teachers, well, they're represented by the elder brother. And then also, clearly, the father in the story represents God, the father. So, it's clear who the main character if you wish represent. But notice this also before we enter into the parable or thinking some of what we can draw from it. Note that the parable is principally directed to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Indeed, that is stated explicitly in verse 3. We read verses 1 and 2, where these two groups were identified, the tax collectors and sinners, and then the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who are muttering. And then in verse 3, it says,

Then Jesus told them. And I think the them clearly is referring to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law particularly. They're the ones who are muttering. They're the ones who are unhappy. They're the ones who need to hear these parables, and then particularly the third parable that we're

going to be thinking about this evening. So, it's to them principally that the parable is directed, and they, remember, are represented by the elder brother. And so, unlike what ordinarily happens, I think it's perhaps Jesus' intention that our focus should be not exclusively by any means, but principally or in significant measure on the elder brother, on both brothers, but not leaving the elder brother as some kind of footnote as often seems to be the case, even in the way in which the parable is designated, the parable of the lost son. It's a strange name for the parable when the very first verse says a father had two sons. And yet in our kind of tradition, and it's not just our tradition, across the Christian tradition, so often the focus has been almost exclusively on the dramatic story of the son who had descended into wild living, and maybe we're kind of almost in a perverse way excited by that. And so, we are drawn in by him much more than by the less interesting elder brother.

So, we're going to think about both brothers, but acknowledge that when the parable was first spoken, it was directed to those who were represented by the elder brother rather than by the younger brother.

[7:06] What I want to do is to compare and contrast the two brothers, which I think is what Jesus wants us to do. He does, after all, begin the parable in the way we just commented. Jesus continued, there was a man who had two sons. And so, evidently, Jesus' concern is that we think about the two sons, and the way we can do that is by comparing them and by contrasting them. And the way we can compare and contrast them, or the way that I propose to compare and contrast them, is to ask some questions about them that revolve around the theme of home or coming home. Now, I'm not going to tell you in advance what the five questions are. We'll just make our way through them one by one. But as I say, there are going to be five questions, so you can be taking a mental note, and if half an hour has passed and we're only in question two, then you can start getting worried. But I assure you that that won't be the case. The first question that I want to pose as we try and compare and contrast these two brothers, the first question is this, what is keeping the brothers from coming home? Now, I'm going to say in a moment why I think both brothers are far from home. But let's just take that as a given for the moment. Bear with me as that hopefully becomes apparent. But what is keeping the brothers from coming home? And let's think of each brother in turn. We'll begin with the younger brother because then it's so much more obvious in a sense what is keeping him from coming home. What separates this young man from his father? Well, we might say this, it's his badness. It's not a very impressive word, but let's go with it or let's work with it. His badness. He is a bad boy, guilty of a lot of bad stuff. Jesus himself in the parable describes him in those terms as one who has squandered his wealth in wild living. And we can just imagine, and preachers have often gone on a very lurid description of all the different bad things he must have done. Of course, we're not told what this wild living consisted of, but you can use your own imaginations. He was guilty of some seriously bad stuff. His brother accuses him of squandering the money on prostitutes. Now, that may or may not be true.

That was the brother's take, and he was hardly a great friend of his brother. So, whether it was true or not, who knows? But he was certainly guilty of some seriously bad stuff, and that's what separates him from his father. We know the story, but I guess the problem of the young man can be summarized in this, in that he was a young man intent on demanding his rights and on doing his own thing. The story begins with him demanding his rights. Give me the money that I'm due. Give me my inheritance. It's my money.

I want it, and I want it now. So, he's demanding his rights. And then he imagines that what will make life fulfilled and what will make life exciting and what will bring him happiness is to do his own thing, whatever that might happen to be. That's not so different to many people today. We might call it the spirit of the age, perhaps of every age. It's my life. It's my inheritance. It's my money. It's my body, and I'll do what I want with what is mine. Now, for some, that will translate into wild living, as was the case of the younger brother in the parable. For others, it may look a lot tamer, but it is equally as selfish. And the result of the bad stuff that he does is to take him far from his father, estranged from his father, and in a far country, to use the more old-fashioned language.

What separates the younger brother from home? What keeps him far from the father? It's his badness, the bad stuff that he does and that he is guilty of. But what about the elder brother? We're making the claim that he too is far from his father. But if he is, what separates this young man from his father? They sleep under the same roof. They eat at the same table. So, what is it that separates him from his father? Well, in a peculiar twist, it is his goodness. And you say, what

madness is this? How could his goodness separate him from his father? But it's true. What keeps this son distant from his father is all the good stuff that he has done all his life. Listen to his own testimony. And I don't think we have reason to question the honesty of what he says. In verse 29, what does he say to his father when his father is pleading with him to come in and join in the celebration? What does he say?

But he answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you. And then very particularly, what follows, and never disobeyed your orders. I've never disobeyed your orders. I am an obedient son.

[11 : 56] I am a good person. I am a dutiful son. People look at me and say, well, isn't he a great son? So much better than the other one. We don't even know where he is. He's a disgrace. But this man, what a good son. What a loyal son. What a dutiful son. He is a good man. And this man evidently was of that same opinion. He says, I'm a good person. I'm an obedient person. And look at how I'm being treated.

And it's his goodness, or rather the pride that his goodness, his obedience produces in him, that is keeping him distant from his father. He is proud and self-righteous. And so, because of that, he is far from his father's heart, resentful of his father, resentful of life. And we'll go on to that.

And so, in this strange way, what separates him from his father, what keeps him far from his father's heart is his goodness, or certainly the pride that accompanies his good behavior.

And the striking reality for us is that we need to repent not only of our bad deeds, but also of our good deeds. Those good deeds that make us imagine that we don't need to be forgiven, that make us imagine that we don't need a Savior, that make us imagine that we're all right. See, that is as rebellious in the sight of God. It's as dishonoring to God as the lewd at sins that perhaps the younger brother was guilty of. One writer has put it this way, and I think there's more to be said than what he says, but there's a sufficient of a grain of truth in it to merit quoting what this writer says. I can't give you the name of the writer. I don't know who it was, but one writer says this, the main thing between you and God is not your sins, but your damnable good deeds. Now, I'm not saying that's the whole truth, but there's a sufficient grain of truth there to at least make us think. You know, our damnable good works, those good works that we imagine make us all right, not needing of a Savior, not needing to be forgiven because we're good people. Sinners need a Savior, not good people like us.

What is separating these brothers from their father? Well, one, it's his badness, and the other, it's his goodness. Well, let's think a little bit more about these two brothers and pose the second question. The second question is this, what's it like to be far from home? What's it like to be far from home? And again, we'll begin with the younger brother, whether it's perhaps more obvious, the characteristics of what it's like to be far from home. Of course, to begin with, it's great.

[14 : 43] I don't know how long it took for the younger brother to squander his inheritance. No doubt it was a very generous inheritance, so who knows? A few weeks, a few months, who knows? It's a parable.

There isn't a right answer to that question. But I have no doubt that at the beginning it was great. He was so happy. When he got his inheritance, when he was able to gather all his inheritance, the idea there is that he turned everything into cash. He sold what was his, and he had this big stash of cash. And he was happy. When he looked in his bag and he saw all that money, he thought, wow, I am made. And he was happy. He was a happy man. We sometimes say, oh, well, money doesn't make you happy. Well, at the beginning it does. You know, when you've got a lot of it and that's what you want, then yeah, you're really happy. And he was happy. It began very well for him, certainly in his estimation. But ultimately, I don't know how long it took, but ultimately as the parable develops, he discovers that being far from home is a very lonely place. We could say perhaps other things about it, but maybe focus in on this, a very lonely place. Here is a young man who wanted to be on his own, to be free from the shackles of his father and the restrictions of home. He wanted to be on his own. And now that he is on his own, he discovers that it's a very lonely place. And I guess the solemn warning there is be careful what you wish for. I guess the one saving grace is that it is so bad for him that it forces the young man to confront his folly and ponder on what can be done to get back home.

What's it like to be far from home? Or for the younger brother, it was a very lonely place. What about the elder brother? He's far from home in his own father's fields. He sleeps under the same roof.

He eats at the same table, but he is far from home, far from his father's heart. He is as far from his father as his younger brother, maybe even farther. And what is that place like for him? Well, in some ways it's very comfortable. It's a very comfortable place. He's warm. He's well-fed. He's wealthy and respected. But as we are presented with him, as we hear the words that he says, as we sense the emotions that are captivating him, we discover that this place far from home is for him a miserable place.

Does he sound happy to you when you hear him speaking to his father? Does he sound like a happy man? He's not a happy man. He's a miserable man. And it's an angry place. We read of him being angry with his father. And I can't imagine that that anger just arose at that moment. Here's a man who's angry with everybody. He's angry with his father. He's angry with his brother, who he doesn't even deign to call his brother. Notice how he says, your son. He says, your son. He doesn't say my brother. No, your son. He's angry with his father. He's angry with his brother. He's angry with his life. He's angry with his circumstances. He's angry with everybody. He's an angry young man. That's what it's like to be far from the father. It's a lonely place. It's a miserable place. It's an angry place.

[18:18] Yes, for him too, a lonely place. We think of the younger brother as the lonely one. You know, we're told very vividly how, you know, his friends deserted him. And there was nobody there to help him. Nobody would give him even a pod to eat. He's all by himself. But there's a very real sense in which this older brother is also in a very lonely place. What's it like to be far from home?

And as we contrast the two brothers, here's a question for you to think about and ponder on. Which of the two brothers are you more likely to find in church? What do you think? Which of the two brothers is more likely to be found sitting in a pew or sitting in a seat in a church? I know what I think is more likely to be the kind of person found gathering in a church. But I let you come to your own conclusions on that one. It's not good to be far from home, far from our heavenly father. It's time to come home. And as we think about how the parable develops, let's ask a third question. Who takes the initiative to get the brothers who are far from home back home? Well, as we go through the parable, at first glance, we might say that the younger brother is the one who takes the initiative. Well, the older brother does nothing to come home. He doesn't realize that he's away from home, that he's far from his father. But though at one level that's true, there is an initiative that is taken by the younger brother that we don't see in the elder brother. It is also true that ultimately, it is the father who reaches out in grace to bring home both his sons. And we have that very language of the father reaching out. You know, in verse 20, we read of, well, we can read what it says there. So, he got up and went to his father. This is the younger brother. And then what do we read? Very familiar words. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion, and he ran to his son. But then the father also goes out and reaches out to the elder brother.

In verse 28, we read, the older brother became angry and refused to go in. And the servant explains what's going on. And what do we then read? So, his father went out and pleaded with him. He went towards the younger son, and he goes out towards the older son. He's the one who's trying to bring them home, to bring them back into his embrace.

The reality is that neither son gets grace. Let me just explain what I mean by that. Neither son gets grace. As I say, let's look at each of them and see how that is true in different ways.

[21:12] Of the younger brother, the parable has very suggestive language. When it speaks of him, when he's reached rock bottom, it says, when he came to his senses. In verse 17, when he came to his senses. Those of you who use the ESV will note that it says there, when he came to himself, which I think is a more helpful translation. When he came to himself. Now, these words can be stood as describing a moment of self-realization, but they also serve as a revealing description of the human condition and plight. Jesus knew that so long as a man was far from God, he was not truly himself.

But notice what the son, the younger son, the younger brother, notice what he aspires to as he devises a plan to return home. We've already said that he does take an initiative. We acknowledge that.

But notice what he aspires to. What does he say when he came to himself, when he came to his senses? How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. What does he aspire to back home? Crumbs from the master's table. He's hungry. That's what he aspires to. He just wants a good square meal. He says, there's food back home. That's why I want

to go home, because there's food. I need food. What does he aspire to in terms of his status in his home? He wants to be one of his father's hired men. Now, that was the lowest of the low. This wasn't even a slave who was resident in the household. This was a day laborer, but who at the very least, at the end of the day, was given sufficient money to eat. Indeed, in the course of the day, as he labored, he would be fed. That's all he aspires to do. He doesn't really aspire to truly come home. And it's interesting, because the attitude of this young brother is often commended as one of humility. And perhaps it's always good to be charitable, and perhaps we can at some level or to some extent acknowledge the humility of this younger brother as he comes to himself. But I wonder, is Jesus commending his humility, or is he highlighting his problem, that he doesn't get grace? The younger brother sees no prospect of truly coming home. He doesn't deserve to be welcomed home, and his father will not and ought not to welcome him home. He's too sinful. He's too far gone. What he aspires to is food and to be a hired servant. That's as far as his aspirations go. The best he can hope for is pity. That's what he hopes for. He hopes to discover pity from his father, and to be fed, and to be a hired laborer.

But what happens? What actually happens? Well, we know what happens. Of course, this is the part of the parable that we so often focus our attention on, and quite rightly so. What happens? Well, we've read the verse. Let's read it again. As he makes his weary way home, the father sees him a long way off.

And how often has the point been made, and quite rightly so, that you can just imagine this father every day looking out to the road to see, will it be today that my son returns? And he sees his son in the distance, and he's filled with compassion. He runs to his son. He throws his arms around him. He kisses him. He places a robe on him. He gives him the signet ring, places sandals on his feet, and he has this big celebration. None of this was expected by the son. And this is grace. The son is experiencing grace.

[25 : 04] He doesn't deserve any of it, but he gets all of it. But what about the elder brother? The elder brother didn't come to himself. There's no moment of self-realization for the elder brother. He didn't even realize that he was far from home, and that's his problem. The elder brother's problem is not that he thinks that he doesn't deserve grace, but that he imagines that he doesn't need grace. It's a bit of a mouthful. Let me just repeat that. The elder brother's problem is not that he thinks that he doesn't deserve grace, but that he imagines that he doesn't need grace. And perhaps at the risk of oversimplifying matters, is it not possible that all who are far from home, far from God, fall into one of these two camps, those who reckon they don't deserve grace and those who reckon they don't need grace?

What about us? Do you fit into one of these camps? Or are you, in some sense, able to identify with these positions that are both demonstrations of not getting grace? But what happens with the elder brother? Well, we see what happens. The father, the father comes to him. We read verse 28, so the father went out and pleaded with him. And then we read in verse 31, the tender words directed to the elder brother. My son, the father said, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. And this is just as tender, just as loving as the father running to meet the younger brother. You know, we focus in on this beautiful picture of him running out to meet the younger brother, but the manner in which he deals with the elder brother is as tender, it's as loving, it's as full of grace on the part of the father. You see, it is the father who ultimately takes this grace-driven initiative to draw his sons back to himself, bring them home. Very quickly, a penultimate question, what is waiting for the brothers back home? Well, what's waiting for both of them is the father's embrace.

This is the embrace that is offered to all, that is offered to you. The father ready to embrace those who would come home to him. The father's embrace awaits them. The father's generosity. He is generous to forgive and generous to bless. The story is told, and I have no reason to doubt its authenticity, but the story is told of the occasion that Abraham Lincoln was asked how he intended to treat the defeated rebels from the south following his victory in the American Civil War. And Lincoln's response points in a small way to the nature of God's generous forgiveness. He is reputed to have said, I will treat them as if they had never been away. I hope that's true. But what a beautiful response. I will treat them as if they had never been away. And this is God's, or a picture of God's generous forgiveness. How does he treat his son who had squandered all his inheritance and wild living? He treated him as if he'd never been away. That's what awaits the brothers, the embrace of the father, the generosity of the father. Generous to forgive, generous to bless, the robe, the ring, the sandals, all pointing to the conferring of the full rights and privileges of sonship. And what awaits

them also is the father's joy. The whole scene that we have presented to us in the parable as the younger son is brought home is one of rejoicing. It's one of celebration. There's this great party that takes place there within the father's home. And as I was thinking about this, there seemed to be just a delicious irony to that because the fun and the fullness of life that the younger son was looking for in the far country was there waiting for him at home all the time. He thought that leaving home would be fun and fulfilling. And yet there was plenty celebration, plenty excitement to be had at home, plenty singing and dancing and celebrating in a manner that was pleasing to the father. But not only is there an irony in the sense of the younger son who left home looking for fun and excitement and joy, also the fun and fullness of life. The elder son was so resentful of not enjoying, was there waiting for him inside his own house, but he wouldn't go in. He was resentful of not having good times. And yet there it was waiting for him. If only he would have gone in to his own house. Let's just close things or draw things to a close with one final question. What did the brothers do? We don't know. We don't know how the brothers responded to the gracious love of the father. Now, everything would suggest that the younger brother certainly received the embrace. He received the robe and the ring. He ate of the fattened calf.

But curiously, nothing is explicitly said of his response. It's all presumed. And of the elder brother, equally, we know nothing of how he responded to the father's advances, gracious, loving advances. We're not told.

[30 : 46] We kind of assume that he rejects them, but we're not actually told. And I wonder if that silence is deliberate, because what Jesus is really saying to his hearers is, what about you? How do you respond?

If you're the younger brother, how do you respond? If you're the elder brother, how do you respond to the father's loving advances? Do you relate to either brother? What will you do? Will you repent of your badness or your goodness or both? Will you hear and respond to the father's loving entreaties to come back home or come closer to home? Now, the parable doesn't touch on what God has done to make our homecoming possible. It's a parable. It's not intended to cover everything that needs to be said. But let me finish with a story that draws out what the parable leaves unsaid, or at least points in the direction of what the parable leaves unsaid. There was a Methodist preacher who served, or his life straddled, the late 19th and early 20th century by the name of Samuel Chadwick.

And the story is told of how he began a sermon on this parable. And more or less along these lines, he began his sermon. He says, I'm going to preach on the third son in the parable of the prodigal son.

Now, we've said that often the mistake is to focus on only one son, and we have to think about both sons. Well, here this man said he was going to preach on the third son. And he launched the question to his congregation, is there another son? Yes, there is. He is the man who is uttering the parable.

He was God's son. He never broke God's heart with his sin or his self-righteousness, but he was so in sympathy with God's heart that he died on the cross to save sinners, to open the way back to the Father's house and to the Father's embrace. Let's pray.

[32 : 45] Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you that we can address you as our Heavenly Father. We thank you that we discover something of what kind of Father you are in this parable that your Son taught. And who better to describe to us what you are like than your eternal Son?

Who better to give us a picture that is true and accurate of what you are like than your own Son? And so we thank you for what we learn, what we discover of your grace and of your tenderness, of your passionate love for us, a love that reaches out to embrace us and to bring us home, help us to come to our senses, to see where we are, to be honest in appraising how far from you we are, perhaps kept far from you by our goodness or by our badness, by the evil that we do or by the good that we're proud of. Whatever it is that separates us from you, help us to repent of it and to respond to your loving and gracious invitation to come home to yourself, to find there the fullness of life and joy that can be found nowhere else. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.