

WHO'S YOUR DADDY?

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There are all different perspectives on who your daddy is, depending on who you talk to and what your background is. Some had good fathers and some not so good. Some of you may not have had a dad around when you were growing up, but we all had a father.

Jesus sometimes referred to His Father as *Abba*. This term expressed warm affection and intimate relationship like a child who calls his father, "Daddy."

Today, we will look at the prodigal son, the elder son and their father, and how each of them related to the others. As we look at their lives, see if you can relate to either of the sons or the father.

The scriptures I will be reading are from Luke, Chapter 15, verses 11-32. This passage of scripture could be called "The Prodigal Sons" or "The Compassionate Father." But, before I read, let me introduce you to Rembrandt's painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," and give you a bit of Rembrandt's background that led him to create this work.

When Rembrandt was a young man he was very proud and got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money. He was known as being brash, self-confident, a spendthrift, sensual, and very arrogant. Some of his paintings reflected his lifestyle at that time. Biographers say that he was a proud young man who was strongly convinced that he was a genius and was eager to explore all that the world had to offer. He was an extrovert who loved luxury and was quite insensitive towards those around him. He made a lot of money, spent a lot of money, and lost a lot of money. His self-portraits in his 20's and early 30's reveal some of those values.

His short period of success, popularity, and wealth was followed by a lot of grief, misfortune and disaster. His life began to deteriorate:

- First he lost his son,
- then he lost his first daughter,
- then he lost his second daughter,
- then he lost his wife,
- then the woman he lived with ended up in a mental hospital,
- then he married a second woman who died,
- then he lost all his money and fame,
- and just before he himself died, his son, Titus, died.

This painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," was one of his last paintings. He had identified very much with the prodigal son, the elder son, and the Father.

When Vincent van Gogh saw this painting he said, "You can only paint this painting when you have died many deaths." Because of all he had been through in his life Rembrandt finally knew what the return to God's mercy really meant and that's what I would like us to look at today in this parable of the lost son.

In the beginning of Luke 15, Jesus had been speaking to the Pharisees and the teachers of religious law. They were upset because Jesus had been sitting down and eating and talking with sinners and tax collectors. They thought it was appalling that he would associate with such people. They considered them corrupt and sinners and this surely was not good for one's reputation. But, the tax collectors and sinners were drawn to Jesus. He treated them with respect and dignity. He showed them love and he talked to them like no one they had ever heard before.

The father in our parable represents our heavenly Father. The younger son represents sinners and tax collectors and the older son represents the Pharisees and teachers of religious law.

The Younger Son

The story we are looking at today is commonly called the “Prodigal Son” or the “Lost Son.” The word “prodigal” does not mean “wayward,” but according to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary it means “recklessly extravagant.” It means to spend until you have nothing left.

Luke 15:11 To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son (maybe about 18) told his father, “I want my share of your estate now before you die.” So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land.”

The son was not only asking for a division of the inheritance but also for the right to dispose of it. (Ordinarily, after the father signed over his possessions he still had the right to live off of the proceeds until his death.) The younger son’s demand was like saying, “I wish you would die,” or “I can’t wait for you to die.” To ask for his inheritance was a sign of deep disrespect. The younger son was essentially saying, that he wanted his father’s things, but not his father. He also rejected the home where he was born, breaking away from his family and the community that he had been a part of.

A traditional Middle Eastern father would have responded to such a request by driving the son out of his family with nothing except a physical beating.

The wealth of this father would have primarily been in real estate, and to get one-third, which would have been the younger son’s share of his net worth, he would have had to sell a great deal of his land holdings. The father patiently endured a tremendous loss of honor as well as the pain of rejected love. The father maintained his affection for his son and bore the agony of his rejection.

In the past people’s identities were largely tied up in their land. To lose part of your land was to lose part of yourself and a major share of your standing in the community. So, the younger brother’s demand would tear his father’s life apart.

The young man was self-absorbed. He thought he would be free to do whatever he felt like – explore the unknown in a distant country, no one looking over his shoulder and telling him what to do or not do. He would be set free to pursue greater things. He thought, “Surely the grass is greener somewhere far away.”

Luke 15:13 And there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve.

He had had a great time partying, spending his money on women, gambling, anything that gave him pleasure. But eventually, his money ran out. All of his so-called friends abandoned him. No more money, no more fun, no more friends. No family, no one to help in time of need. He didn’t expect a famine in the land. After all, he never thought he would be without food and starving. He hadn’t really planned for a rainy day. Now what could he do?

Luke 15:15 He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

Now, this was not the life he had expected. It turned out to be much harder than he had ever imagined. After all, he had been pretty sheltered at home with family, friends, neighbors, a community that looked out for each other. Now he was all alone in a pig pen, envying what the pigs were eating. A pretty sad situation that he had put himself in.

Well, with nothing else to do but sit there with the pigs, he began to think about home and how good life had once been.

Luke 15:17 When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, "At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!"¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you,¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'

Hired men were various kinds of tradesmen and craftsmen who lived in a local village and earned a wage. The younger son had disgraced his family and therefore the whole community. For such a violation an apology was not sufficient – restitution was also necessary. The son knew he didn't have any right to come back into the family, but if he could be hired as an apprentice then he could learn a trade and earn a wage and begin to pay off his debt.

He was at an all-time low in his life and knew if he didn't do something he was going to die there with the pigs. He was probably remembering his clean, warm bed at home, a hot meal from which he could eat as much as he wanted because there was plenty at home. He probably remembered his friends and how much fun they had together. He remembered the older brother who had always been there to protect him and help him. He remembered his father's love, provision, and guidance. So many good things about home he could remember.

He thought about everything he had thrown away when he left and how much he had lost in this distant land. He was probably feeling ashamed and guilty of all that he had done and he had nowhere to go but home. He was probably thinking all the way home, "Will my father receive me and hire me as a servant?"

Luke 15:20 So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

The father had been watching and waiting for this day. He had probably been looking out into the distance for his son every day, hoping this would be the day his son would return. He had wept many tears and had many sleepless nights, concerned for his son's well-being.

How many of you have waited up at night, pacing the floor, waiting for a son or daughter or a loved one to come home? They didn't arrive when they were expected? You may have thought something bad had happened to them. Your imagination ran through different scenarios, the longer you had to wait. You just wanted some word that they were okay.

Well, this father had waited a very long time for his beloved son.

He hadn't tried to stop his son from leaving, even though he knew it would cause great pain, both to him and to his son. It broke his heart, because he knew his son had to learn the hard way and make the decision to come home on his own. No one else could make that decision for him; it had to come from his own heart. It was the love of the father that allowed his son to find his own life, even at the risk of losing it. He needed to see with his own eyes where freedom truly was. The world had nothing to offer his son that was lasting or had any real value. It had all been a myth or a lie. It wasn't anything like what he had imagined.

Now, the father finally saw him coming from some distance away. He probably recognized the way he walked. He was so excited, he couldn't wait for him and began to run to him. His son was finally coming home!

Luke 15:21 His son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son."²² But his father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet."²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast.²⁴ For this son of mine was dead, and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found." So the party began.

Notice the father didn't say, "You are such a mess, what have you done? What happened to you? You look terrible. Where's all your money? You sure made some dumb decisions. Too bad, you blew it big time!"

The father never even waited for his son to finish speaking. He loved him so much he accepted him without any strings attached. He only showered him with love and acceptance. When he told them to put the finest robe on his son, it was the father's finest robe. He was saying "This is my heir, my beloved son," and he was restored to the family. The father didn't want to wait for him to pay it back or wait for him to grovel. He covered his poverty and rags with his robe. He gave his son the family ring, and sandals for his feet.

He was no longer a poverty-stricken slave that no one cared about. He had returned to his daddy. He saw his father with new eyes. He was no longer just the father who was the authority figure, telling him what he could or could not do. He now saw him as the one who loved him so much he allowed him to go and make his mistakes and freely took him back and embraced him. He felt fully safe and fully loved. He was truly home with his daddy.

Matthew 18:3 "Unless you return and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Jesus doesn't ask us to remain a child but to become one. To reach the innocence that can only come through conscious choices.

The Elder Son

Luke 15:24 Meanwhile the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home he heard music and dancing in the house,²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on.²⁷ "Your brother is back," he was told, "and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return."²⁸ The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him,²⁹ but he replied, "All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have."

The elder son was obedient, law-abiding, and hardworking. People respected him, admired him, praised him, and likely considered him a model son. Outwardly, he probably looked faultless. But when confronted with his brother's return, all of his anger and resentment — his real feelings — came out. He may have kept them deeply hidden for awhile. All of his judgment, condemnation, and prejudice were coming out. He was being self-righteous and prideful. He thought he was better than his brother because of all of his good works. He was trying to prove his worth by what he had done. To him, his father was just a demanding boss to whom he reported. He never saw him as a loving father who loved him unconditionally. He missed that intimate relationship with his father.

The elder son was so angry he refused to go in and celebrate. He had been working all day, every day, and now his brother has come home after spending everything and living it up, doing whatever pleased him. This was not acceptable to him. His bitterness turned to resentment, and to him it was justified. His heart had been hardened toward his brother and he was not willing to forgive him. He didn't even acknowledge him as his brother. In his eyes, he had died when he left and he didn't expect him back. When he spoke to his father he referred to the younger son as "this son of yours..." The elder son only thought of how hard and how long he had worked.

In Rembrandt's painting, the elder son kept his distance and just observed. He didn't share any joy with his father or brother. The elder brother was dressed much like his father in the painting and both had a full beard, but he did not have a heart like his father's.

He was disrespectful to his father in the way that he spoke to him and by his refusal to come to the banquet. He was not concerned for his father's happiness. The whole village would have been invited to participate and

it would have been a disgrace to the father for his elder son not to participate. His elder son could not enjoy this special occasion because he refused to humble himself. He would not ask forgiveness for his pride, self-righteousness, and disrespect.

The father and his younger son — the focal point of this painting — were in the midst of the light of compassion and love. All of the emotion and healing were happening between those two alone. The rest of the figures were in the shadows. The elder son had some light on his face to show that he also was a son of the father. He could step fully into the light — the circle of love — and forgive his brother and receive forgiveness, but he refused.

The elder son had allowed his thoughts to run wild and the more he thought about it, the more he felt misunderstood, rejected, and neglected. His thoughts paralyzed him and kept him in the darkness. He had separated himself emotionally from his family, even while he was with them.

The Father

Luke 15:31 His father said to him, "Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

In the painting you can see the prodigal son's head resting on his father's chest. This is the position we should be taking every day. Listening to our Heavenly Father's heart and hearing what he is saying. Don't interrupt him, but listen. We need to bend our knees in the spirit (perhaps physically also) and humble ourselves. He never forces us to come to him. He waits and looks for you. There is peace and restoration in His presence.

Much In Common

The two sons shared much in common:

- Both sons wanted what the father had, but not the father himself.
- Both sons resented their father's authority and looked for ways to get away from it.
- Both rebelled — one outside, one inside.
- Both were very disrespectful to their father.
- Both were alienated from the father's heart.

One son returned to the father with a humble and repentant heart, while the other son was stuck, unwilling to forgive, full of bitterness and anger. As the parable ends, the elder son still was not reconciled.

Henri Nouwen, author of "The Return of the Prodigal Son," says, "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere? Why do I keep leaving home, where I am called a child of God, the Beloved of the Father? I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me — my health, my intellectual and emotional gifts — and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them for the glory of God."

Where is it that *you* go and spend your time and resources? Does the Lord get included? Each of us has to look at and evaluate that for ourselves.

Will you stop and notice him today and come to him? We can become so busy with other things that we leave Him waiting. He waits for us to remember Him, notice Him and run to Him. He has everything we need and loves us more than anyone is even capable of. He tells us that everything He has is ours. As His children, we are His heirs.

Jesus was the prodigal son of the Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to Him so that we could become like Him and return with Him to the Father's home. Remember "prodigal" means recklessly extravagant — to spend until you have nothing left.

Jesus spent His all for us. He took our beatings, our abuse, our lashes with a whip, our nails, our crown of thorns, our spear in the side. All our sins He took on Himself. He bled for us and died. He gave his life. There was nothing left to give, He gave it all. He held nothing back. He loved when we didn't know Him or even care about Him. Unconditional — we can't work for it, we can't beg for it — it's a gift He freely gives. He just loves us where we are and beckons us to come to Him. His grace and love is our greatest hope. He arose from the dead so that we might have life and eternity with Him, in our real home. The Father's divine love and mercy transforms death into life, eternal life with Him.

So what can we do? Here are some ways to develop your walk with the Father, your Heavenly Daddy.

Your goal should be to become more and more like the father in this story, not like either of his sons.

Be quick to forgive those that hurt you. You can only do this with your Father's help.

Jesus said, while hanging on the cross, *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34). *"But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too"* (Mark 11:25).

You must recognize your need for the Father and His love and open the door of your heart to let Him in. He will never force you to accept His love. *"Look, I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends"* (Rev. 3:20).

Don't judge others, like the elder son did with his brother. They may not dress the way you think they should or speak the way you would like them to, but you have not lived their lives and don't know what they have been through. The church should be a safe place for all who are lost to come in and feel the love of God and His children. It should be a place where they can belong and grow as children do, making mistakes along the way and being helped up again and guided while they are learning how to walk.

The Lord is the only one who has the authority to judge. The Father loves each one of His children no matter what they look like or what they do. *"God alone, who gave the law is the judge. He alone has the power to save or destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?"* (James 4:12).

You need to spend time with your Father in conversation — prayer. Get to know Him. That means a two-way conversation — not just you talking, but also waiting on Him and listening for His words in your heart. How can you really get to know your Daddy if you only speak to him once or twice a week? He wants to be more than an acquaintance to you. He wants to be involved in your life every day. *"Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart"* (Col. 4:2). Devotion means that its ongoing, a way of life

Give the Lord all of your praise and worship. Don't take credit for what God has done. Without Him we can't do anything. *"For everything comes from Him and exists by His power and is intended for His glory. All glory to Him forever! Amen"* (Romans 11:36).

It also means being obedient when he tells you things to do, whether you like it or not. He knows what is best. Jesus says, *"Anyone who loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home in him"* (John 14:23). He wants to live in each one of us.

Deuteronomy 30:19 Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Choose life.

I encourage you also to read or listen to "The Father's Love Letter," which can be found at www.fathersloveletter.com/media .