

## The Parable of the Amazing Father and the Two Sons

Luke 15:11-32

A Muslim said to his Christian friend, **"You Christians have distorted the message of Nabi Jesus and the story of the Prodigal Son proves that the cross is unnecessary to forgiveness. The boy comes home. His father welcomes him. There is no Incarnation and no Cross. Islam with no incarnation, no cross and no Saviour preserves the true message of Jesus."**

But for Christians, this is perhaps the best loved parable. Is it true that the Cross is missing? If the Cross is essential to forgiveness, why isn't it mentioned in the story?

This is a very emotional story, but to understand it you need to have some knowledge of first century village life in Palestine. If we don't understand this culture, we lose a lot of the meaning. The story was first taught to Jewish peasant people. Even the educated Pharisees and Scribes would have had their roots in this peasant culture. The culture isn't explained in the story because "everybody knows it"! For example: "everybody knows" that to be polite to your father is more important than to obey him. Jesus disagrees with this. [See Mt. 21:28-32] So, what we don't know of the culture causes us to miss much of the meaning of the story.

Middle Eastern peasant culture hasn't changed much in 20 centuries! Patterns of speech, dress and family structure remain almost the same. One French scholar wrote:

**"The fellaheen (Egyptian peasants) have changed their masters, their religion, their language and their crops, but not their manner of life. They are impervious to change. (Egyptian Fellaheen) are using the same ploughs, the same methods of treating the body, .... many of the same marriage and funeral customs. No revolution - no evolution."**

So no change in peasant life in 5000 years!!

Jesus spoke Aramaic. It is a Semitic language – as is Arabic. They are close in structure and vocabulary. So especially in early Arabic translations of the New Testament (8th century AD) we have a language that is fairly close to the mother tongue of Jesus.

### The context of the story

***"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and Scribes grumbled saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"*** (Lk. 15:1-2)

Clearly the religious establishment felt increasingly threatened by the Lord Jesus. At this point in the story the Lord Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Jerusalem where the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were going to happen. [See Lk. 10:51]

Jesus told three stories: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Lost Sons. These stories build towards the climax. Did the older son come to the party?

In the delta of Egypt there are still tax collectors! An individual buys from the government the right to collect taxes in a certain area. Each tax collector sets his own rates, but is bound by contract to deliver a certain amount of money to the government. Sadly, as in 1st century Palestine, so also today there is still a great deal of graft and favouritism. But in Palestine the government was Roman. Today in modern Arab politics it is a very great insult to call someone "an agent of the imperialists" - meaning the British, but now including the Americans! Egyptian tax collectors are not loved today. But in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine they were viewed not only as extortionists, but also as people who had betrayed their religion and their people (traitors).

'Sinners' were 'adulterers' (Mt. 21:31-32; Lk. 18:11), Gentiles (Mt. 8:17) and all breakers of the law – i.e. those of a very low moral character. But tax collectors and sinners came to Jesus **and He welcomed them!** That welcome was a huge problem for the religious establishment. Even worse, Jesus ate with such people! The Pharisees thought this action made Jesus 'unclean'. To eat a meal with a Middle Easterner means a great deal. It implies total acceptance and a sense of you 'blessing' the one you are eating with.

Eating with people is very symbolic. Remember the big fight between Peter and Paul over the matter of eating with Gentiles. [See Gal. 2:11-12] Clearly friendship was okay, but to eat with someone was something else. It implied a covenant relationship. So the 'them' (Lk. 15:3) are the Pharisees, but everyone was listening.

The story is often called, 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son'. Sometimes each of the two sons is granted a separate story. But in fact, it is one story and both sons are needed in the story. So perhaps a better title would be, 'The Two Lost Sons'. But the hero of the story is actually the truly Amazing Father!

There are similarities in the stories

Chief Actor in the story	The Lost Sheep	The Lost Coin	The Lost Sons
Jesus	The shepherd	The woman	The Father
The 'sinners'	The lost sheep	The lost coin	The younger son
The Pharisees	99 sheep	9 coins	The older son

Note the progression: the Lost Sheep is 1-in-100

then 1-in-10

then 1-in-2

Also note where the loss takes place and where the lost are found:

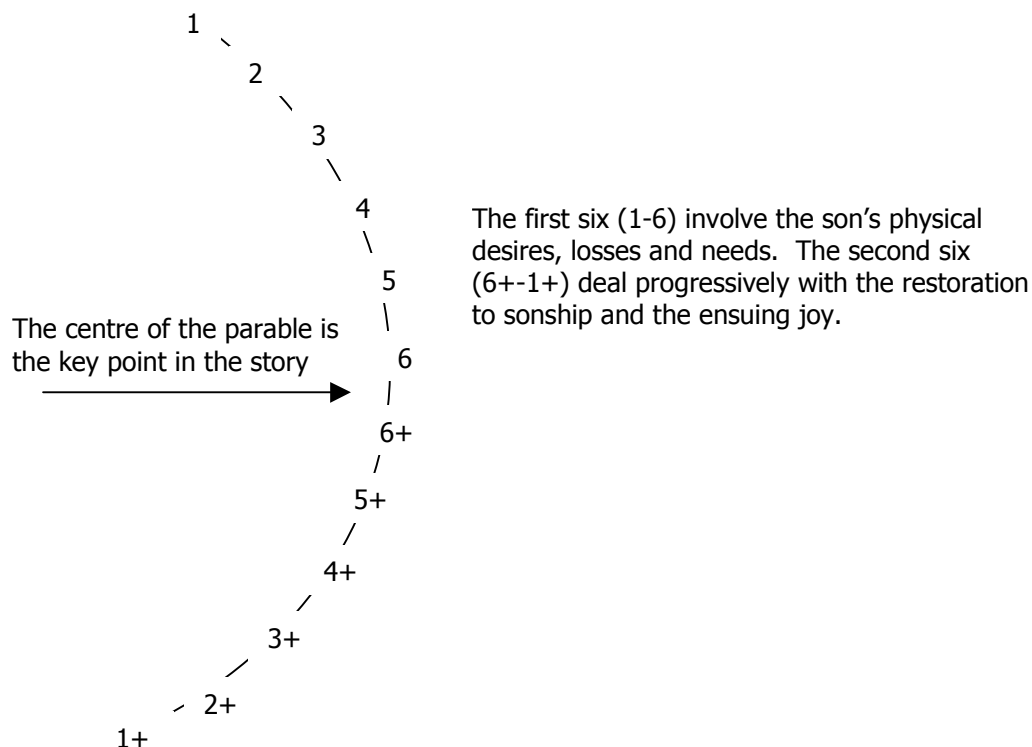
- in the wide wilderness
- in the house
- in the circle of the father's love

Anyone who seriously studies this story is awed by it's almost inexhaustible content.

➤ **The structure:** two parabolic stories

Remember that parables are **not** allegories. The father is not God incognito, but just an ordinary earthly 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian father. Yet he is a symbol of the Lord Jesus Himself. There is a difference between strict identification and characterisation.

The story has a double parabolic structure - one for each son. But the structure of the two parables is not the same – i.e. each parable is not a mirror image of the other but they are similar.



## The Younger Son

1. A son is lost: **"Give me my share"**.
  2. Goods are wasted in extravagant living.
  3. Everything is lost, **"He spent everything - he began to want"**.
  4. The Great Sin – feeding pigs for Gentiles
  5. Total rejection, **"No one gave him anything"**.
  6. A change of mind, **"He came to himself - I will die here"**.
- Point of Inversion →
- 6+ An initial repentance, **"Make me a servant"** (I will pay it back).
  - 5+ Total acceptance, **"His father ran and kissed him"**.
  - 4+ The Great Repentance, **"I am no more worthy to be called your son"**.
  - 3+ Everything gained! - a robe, a ring and shoes - a restoration to sonship.
  - 2+ Goods are used in joyful celebration.
  - 1+ A son is found, **"My son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found"**.

## The Older Son

1. He comes near the house. He was out in the fields.
2. Your brother is safe - a village feast
3. The father comes to the son to be reconciled to him.
4. A complaint by the son, "How you treat me"
- 4+ A complaint by the son, "How you treat him"
- 3+ A father tries to be reconciled to his son.
- 2+ Your brother is safe.
- 1+ Missing ??? [Should be: "And he came and entered the house and joined in the music and dancing and the two sons were reconciled to each other and to their father.]"

### ➤ The cultural aspects of the story to bring out the meaning.

#### A son is lost

In his request for his portion of the inheritance, the younger son is wishing for his father's death. If you ask people in the Middle East:

*"Have you ever heard of a son asking this of his father?"* the answer is a very shocked, **"Never!"**

*Would a son ever ask such a thing?"*

**"Impossible."**

*"If anyone ever did, what would happen?"*

**"The father would beat him in front of all the extended family. If the father couldn't do it, it would be the responsibility of the oldest son to beat the son."**

*"Why?"*

**"It is really a terrible dishonour for the whole family to want your father dead!"**

There is a story told in Lebanon of a Syrian farmer's older son who once asked for his inheritance. In great anger his father drove him from his home.

Under Jewish law and Muslim law wills always come into effect after the death of the maker of the will - as they do here. In all Middle Eastern literature from the Code of Hammurabi until today there is never an example of a son asking for his inheritance.

This is a very shocking story! It is a twofold request:

- i) He requests a division of the inheritance – 2/3rds for the older son (the double portion) and 1/3rd for himself. This wish is granted. So 1/3rd of the property is his, but he can't sell

it. Under Jewish law, parents have the right to live off the produce of the land so the land couldn't be sold.

ii) He wants the land sold so he can have the money! Implicit in his request was, **"Father, I can't wait for you to die"**. This indicates a very profound breakdown in the relationship between the father and the younger son! The boy is lost indeed!

### **What does this tell us about the younger brother?**

1. The younger son is in complete rebellion against his father. Perhaps Jesus is saying that human beings in rebellion against God really long for the death of God!
2. He is driven by a self-centred pride. He says, "Give me my portion of the inheritance". But he implies, "The devil take the rest of you, I don't care". There is no grace or mercy involved.
3. A relationship is broken, not a law. Deut. 21:17 says that the younger son should get one third of the inheritance. But the law doesn't specifically say that the son must wait for his father's death. So the younger son has not broken the law, but he has broken his father's heart.
4. He doesn't seem to care how much the family will suffer because of what he wants. The wealth of a family is in its land. Now 33% of it is gone. This would be a staggering loss to a family. The accumulated economic gains of generations would be lost in a few days.
5. The younger son probably got a poor price for the land. Even in a small town days were often spent in bargaining, but he wanted the money in a hurry.
6. There is no trust or love for his father. Clearly he doesn't trust his father to direct his life. He demands privilege without responsibility.
7. He cuts himself off from his roots, his land and his family. A man's family is his security, his social insurance, his old-age pension, his assurance of marriage, his physical well-being – i.e. everything! In so doing, he is a man not to be trusted. So he has substituted the 'passing' for the permanent.

### **What does the father do?**

The father is expected to explode with anger and severely punish the son for his very dishonourable attitudes to his whole family. Middle Easterners find this story very puzzling for what father would grant freedom to leave like this to a son who rejects him and so jeopardises his own living? He gives away the ownership of the land. The father has to sell the land **publicly** – 2/3rds goes to the elder son and 1/3rd he sells to non-family to get the cash. He has to give away everything! Under rabbinical law, a father could give a gift to his son only if it was a voluntary act – free of all duress. But here the father is under duress.

So the father sells all the land legally **as if he were happy to do this**. And he demonstrates a very remarkable love for his two sons **and** a tremendous swallowing of dishonour and shame! He suffers greatly, but he does not disown his son. Someone has said, **"God grants us freedom even to reject His love"**.

### **The older brother**

He is mentioned twice in the opening scene. He also received his share in the inheritance. What would you expect the older brother to do? He certainly knows the entire story, as does everyone else in the village!

1. Very loudly protest at his father's actions and refuse to accept the inheritance. His silence indicates that his relationship with his father is not good either.
2. If there is a breakdown in relationships in the Middle East, the parties are usually reconciled by a third-party shuttling between the two parties and negotiating. In this way no one is shamed. Culturally, the older brother should have taken the role of reconciler or mediator and this would have been forced on him by culture and society. His silence implies refusal. Normally, even if brothers hated each other they would go through the motions in order to honour the father and not bring disgrace on the family. With a mediator at work, the goal is

that there should be no winners and no losers. A mediator is always selected on the basis of the strength of his relationship with the quarrelling parties.

Why does the older brother refuse? He probably hated his brother, but if this was the case still, for the sake of his father, he would try to bring reconciliation. But the older son refuses and so indicates he also hates his father. Perhaps he was secretly delighted! Perhaps he was part of the reason why his brother was leaving! The oldest son is considered very important - the leader of his generation in the family. He gets the double portion and, in the Arab World, his father is named after him, so I would be called Abu Alan.

So the older brother is also lost to his father and the brothers refuse to dwell together.

### **In a far country**

The younger son sells his land quickly, *"In not many days"* and turns it into cash. As he goes from one prospective buyer to another, the intensity of the community's hatred and disgust would intensify. In the Middle East a farmer's attachment to his family's land is intense.

**Note:** Naboth and his vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-5)

~ 2 million Palestinians still live in 'camps' in Jordan and Lebanon (62 years after the war) hoping to go home to their lands.

Settlers are very hard to move. Why? The land doesn't belong to them; they belong to the land. It is their identity! In Jordan, you can usually only buy land from your own extended family/tribe.

So for the younger son to sell his land would have produced amazement and horror. Usually the selling of land drags on and on. Perhaps he feels shame and so sells quickly and leaves. This indicates to everyone, "My family and community are worthless!" So he leaves and the only thing that follows him is the love of his broken-hearted father.

When the younger son arrives in "the far country" - i.e. among Gentiles - he wastes his money (in fact it was his father's) in carefree and spendthrift ways. We are not told how. Arabic translations of the Bible that date back to the 8th century use words like "expensive", "indolent", "luxurious" and "wasteful".

In the Middle East today, a young man from a village arriving in a big city would use any money he had to establish a reputation for generosity - giving expensive gifts and holding large parties. This is because a reputation of generosity is considered a great virtue. When the money was gone, *"He began to want"*. Note the contrast between "extravagant living" and coming poverty.

Famines were common in the Middle East. For a hundred years between 169 BC and AD 70 there were 10 major famines. A lone Jew in a far Gentile country, without money and friends, would be especially vulnerable in a great famine. So this 1st century audience would have known all about famine. In the statement *'He began to want'*, the implication is that **he more than the others** is in need. So what does he do?

He could go home. He probably knows his father would have him back. But he has two problems to overcome.

- His older brother's scorn! Not only will he be blamed for the loss of the money, he will have to "eat his brother's bread" - i.e. depend entirely on his brother. This cup is too bitter to drink! His relationship with his brother is so bad that it keeps him from restoring his relationship with his father - a common story.
- He must face the village. The villagers will despise him even more. Life in their midst would be impossible. Village children can be cruel to strangers. [See 2 Kings 2:23-24]

Famines are truly terrible. People sell their children to the rich for food and to keep them from starving. There are records of people venturing out at night unarmed and being attacked and eaten. [See the book, **Fire and Sword in the Sudan (1879-1895)** by von Statin about a terrible famine in Sudan in 1889.]

So what does he do? He 'glues' himself to a citizen of that country. In the Middle East, the desperation of the poor leads him to attach himself to any potential benefactor. For example:

You park your car and immediately a man appears. He opens your door and begins furiously to polish your already clean windscreen. He grabs your shopping bag out of your hand and follows you into the shop. All efforts to shake him off are futile. He picks up your groceries from the counter, puts them in the bag and carries them to the car. Of course, he expects you to pay him a lot for his loyal and faithful service! He has 'glued' himself to you.

The younger son arrived in this community with money and has retained some self-respect. So he doesn't beg. He wants a job. He forces himself on a "citizen of that country". His services have not been requested.

The polite way for a Middle Easterner to get rid of unwanted hangers on is to assign them a task you know they will refuse! So the "citizen" – i.e. an important man - offers him a job that he knows a Jew will refuse - the job of a pig herder! The hearers of the parable must have been amazed that it didn't work! Both Jews and Muslims are forbidden to raise pigs. So the younger son was willing to give up the practice of his religion because he was so hungry. The younger son had lost all his self-respect.

Why was he so hungry? He was forced to eat the seeds of wild carob pods. There is a sweet "Syrian carob" used to make molasses. But this is called the "thorny carob" and is usually used as firewood. It has very bitter seeds and they have no nourishment. Eating these berries will never keep you alive. It says he wanted to eat the seeds but he didn't. Why? Perhaps he was so weak he couldn't compete with the pigs!

**"And no one gave him anything."** He probably tried his hand at begging, but failed even at that. So he was dying of hunger. He said to himself, **"I perish here with hunger"** and **"He came to himself"**. He will soon be too weak to return home. He must go back while he has the strength to do so.

### **A partial, inadequate, but rabbinically acceptable repentance - a face-saving plan**

The Aramaic word used here means 'to turn around, to repent, to retract, to return'. But the Greek word used is not the theological word 'repent', but more like 'to change an opinion'. In colloquial Arabic there is a word '*nefesh*'. This is the word used here in the Arabic Bible - **"He came to his '*nefesh*'"**. When someone is very flustered and doesn't know where he is or what is happening around him they say, "He doesn't know where his '*nefesh*' has gone". Your '*nefesh*' is something that can be separated from you resulting in complete confusion. In colloquial English we might say. "He's lost it. He needs to get himself together again!"

So the younger son comes up with 'a face-saving plan'. He decides to return home. What was he repenting of? He is really just repenting of having lost his money! He is dying of hunger. He has no choice. In returning, he has three relationships that he has to mend:

- with his father
- with his older brother
- with his village community

The first and most important of these is with his father. How will he do this? He will work for his father **as a hired servant**. There were three levels of servant in a typical 1st century Palestinian farm:

- hired servants - usually day labourers without a set wage
- bondsmen (douloi), who, as slaves, were part of the property and lived with the family (family retainers). They were usually better treated than hired servants.
- slaves of the lower class who were servants to the douloi.

The "hired servant" was an outsider without much honour. He didn't belong to the family and didn't have any vested interests in the property. He was a casual labourer, but he was a free man!

The son knew that in his father's house even the hired servants had, **"Bread enough and to spare"** - usually a luxury. Bread is the staple food for people in the Middle East. In Egyptian colloquial Arabic 'bread' and 'life' are the same word. Generosity in the Middle East is not according to how much you eat, but how much is left over! Remember when Jesus fed the crowds? They collected the baskets of left over food afterwards to show the extent of His generosity.

As a free man, the 'hired servant' wasn't socially inferior to his employer. So he could live independently on his income in his village. He could maintain his pride and his independence. Perhaps the son thought he might be able to pay back what he had lost, regain honour and fulfil his moral responsibilities to his father. So in the plan, he can save himself! He wants no grace! The term, "Make me" (one of your hired servants) has the concept of "fashion out of me". By implication he is saying, "Father, I am not useless to you. I am still good raw material. Fashion out of me a workman."

Note that the son is ordering his father! In effect he is saying, "Disregard my past. I am sorry things turned out as they did. I am not useless to you, I am still good raw material."

The plan has some good points:

- He admits he lost the money.
- He admits he is unworthy to be received back.
- He admits he has also sinned against God (heaven).

### **What about his older brother?**

How does the plan reconcile him to his brother? As a hired servant he will not be eating his brother's bread. He knows that legally everything left of the estate is his brother's. But from the profits of the farm, his father has the right to pay whom he likes. His older brother will resent his presence, but he won't be living in the family house, so reconciliation with his brother is unnecessary.

Hired servants didn't live in the house, for they were not trusted. So he won't be living with his father either. In Bible times, it was common practice for a man in debt to sell himself for a specific period of time in payment of his debt. [See Lev. 25:39-55; 2 Kings 4:1] So he can negotiate with his father the number of years of service necessary to settle his debt. So he can redeem himself with honourable labour and over the years he will regain his honour in the village and even, in the end, with his brother.

### **His relationship with his village community**

He has failed in the 'far-off country'. It is very difficult for any emigrant to return home if he is not successful. But his shame is compounded by the manner of his leaving and how he lost his money to 'foreigners'. His return to the village will be humiliating. There is no solution to this but to tough it out. He will have to pay this bitter price in order to get home. But he must go home because he is starving.

### **What did the Rabbis teach about repentance and was this similar to the mosque?**

Repentance was primarily "a work" done by man that assured him of God's favour in the future. The "work" could be prayer and fasting, almsgiving and reparation. Repentance was a work that man did to earn God's favour. The work of repentance had to be sincere.

So the younger son decides to repent and make **reparations** to his father. The people listening to this story would have thought of this as a good plan. But Jesus goes on to demonstrate how **shallow** this repentance really was. This is the basic issue between Christianity and Islam. Are we to be God's servants and He a demanding Master? Or are we His sons and He a Loving Father?

The son doesn't appreciate what he has done. He has a broken relationship, not a broken law. It looked like a good plan in 'the far country'. He hasn't faced the fact that he has broken his father's heart. The problem of mending a broken heart doesn't concern him - only paying back the money. He doesn't want reconciliation. He wants to eat. Because he hasn't faced his own evil heart, he doesn't understand what reconciliation really costs. So the son goes home.

### **The Amazing Father's costly demonstration of totally unexpected love**

Middle Easterners live in villages or towns - never in a house by itself. So the father lives in a village community. We are not told what the father thinks about his younger son. Perhaps he expects his son to fail. Perhaps he thinks he is dead. Does he ever expect to see him again? But evidently the father waits and watches for this son. If he does ever come home, the father knows how the village will treat his younger son. He will be mocked by the crowd that will gather spontaneously as word flashes across the village telling of his return. The vicious tongues of the village and the gathering mob can be truly terrifying.

What the father does is best understood as **an amazing series of dramatic acts designed to protect the young man from the hostility of the village**. The "talk" of a tightly knit village can have terrible consequences. If a mother or sister or wife is said to be caught in any type of extramarital sex, custom demands that the men of the family kill the offending woman - an honour killing. Execution is unfailing and immediate. If you ask, "How can you do this? Don't you love your mother/sister/wife?" The answer will be, "Oh yes, very deeply." "So how could you do such a thing?" The answer will be, "The talk of the people! You must do it." "Talk" is a major source of shame.

Things work out very differently from the way the son expects. At best he hopes to walk through the village undetected. The son would have to wait outside the gates of the home while a servant goes and asks his father if he should let him in. Hopefully he won't be turned away and hopefully he will be summoned and punished in some way. In the culture, the father **has to** punish the son very harshly in order to preserve his own honour in the community. In fact, all that the father does is **to honour the son** and help him restore his relationship with the family and the community. How does he do this?

**He "races" down through the village to greet his son!** In the Middle East, sons always go and greet their father, thus honouring him. There is no circumstance when a father goes and greets his son. A worker visited a number of villages in the delta region of Egypt and asked the village elders if they knew of a father behaving in this way. They said it would never happen. "What if the son was the President of Egypt?" Still they said, "No never!" "What about if he won an Olympic gold medal?" "No!" "Why?" "It is an unchangeable rule that sons must honour their fathers."

But this father **races** to greet his son! The Greek word is used elsewhere in the New Testament for a foot race in a stadium. **"His father saw him and had compassion and raced!"** Middle Eastern men never run! With long loose robes the danger of tripping and falling on your face in the dirt is too great. Aristotle said, **"Great men never run in public"**. So men in the Middle East walk in a slow and dignified fashion. This father had probably not run anywhere in 30 years, but now he lifts his robes and races down the narrow streets like a teenager. Everyone in the village would be utterly amazed seeing this old man shaming himself so publicly. Why does he do it? Compassion - he knows what his son will face when he enters the village. So he takes upon himself the humiliation that his son will receive.

There is a hint here of the Incarnation, for the father represents the Lord Jesus. This is something like the Incarnation for out of compassion for us Jesus took this very humiliating posture in order to reconcile us to Himself. Jesus left his home, not waiting for us to come to him. He humiliated Himself.

When the father races through the streets, half the village runs after him - including the father's servants. What happens when he meets his son will be recounted in every home in the village in half an hour!

The word "compassion" here has its roots in 'the innards' - the guts in the abdomen. Greeks, Romans and all Middle Easterners thought of 'the innards' as the seat of the emotions - especially kindness and compassion. When you see something bad happen to someone you love, there is a sickening contraction in your abdomen. Strangely, in the colloquial Arabic of villages in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, when a villager hears a specially moving story of suffering or when a very close friend or family member is leaving, he will say, "You are cutting up my intestines!" So the father races because, "His intestines were all cut up" in compassion for his son.

So the father comes out of his house and in a dramatic act, demonstrates unexpected love **publicly** by deeply humiliating himself. This is the turning point of the whole story. The Lord Jesus is indicating God's gracious welcome to sinners.

The father makes his reconciliation public at the edge of the village. So the son will enter the village under the protective care of his father's acceptance and affirmation. The son must have been truly astonished. He had probably steeled his nerves to walk through the village, but now he sees his father running towards him. Rather than experiencing the ruthless hostility he deserves, the son witnesses **an unexpected, visible demonstration of love - very costly love** in an honour-shame society.



At this point the father **acts**. There are no words of acceptance and welcome. The love he has for his son is too profound for words, **only acts** will do. What does he do? He kisses him continuously. He pours out kisses on his dirty, raggedly dressed son. The fact that the father hugs the boy prevents the son from kissing the feet of his father or even his hand as would normally be expected in the Middle East. A kiss in public is a sign of reconciliation.

Muslims sometimes say that the younger son was saved without "a saviour" – he returns – his father forgives him. Therefore there is no Cross, no suffering and no Saviour. If a man seeks forgiveness, says the Muslim, God is merciful and will forgive – the Cross is unnecessary.

What they fail to see is that the suffering of the Cross was not primarily the physical torture, but the agony of rejected love. In this story the father has been in agony all through the separation from his son – always longing for his return.

### **How does the younger son react?**

He only gives half of his prepared speech – the part about, **"Make me as one of your hired servants"** is missing. Why? Perhaps it was **self-interest** – sort of, "This is better than I ever expected. Why not take all I can get? I will keep silent and accept. If he will give me sonship, who cares about being a workman?"

It probably is not this because sonship has distinct disadvantages. For example:

- He will have to live with his older brother.
- He will be fed from his brother's property.
- He will be under the total authority of his father.
- He won't be able to "earn his own way".

So the younger son has changed his mind. The new definition of repentance is:

### **Repentance is the capacity to forego pride and accept graciousness.**

So why did he repent? He came home with the rabbinic/Muslim view of repentance – that you **have to earn grace**. He is shattered by his father's amazing love demonstrated in his willingness to humiliate himself. Such grace was totally unexpected. He knows now that he can't offer any solution to the lost money. He sees that the point isn't the lost money, but rather a broken relationship that he can't heal. The father is offering a new relationship as a pure gift. He can offer nothing. To assume he can compensate his father is an insult! At the beginning he insisted on complete control of his life. But now he leaves his destiny entirely in his father's hands. Now the reality and enormity of his sin and the resulting intensity of his father's suffering overwhelm him.

So the son truly repents in the light of his father's outpouring of grace and love visibly demonstrated and says, **"I am not worthy"**. Full repentance is the result of a demonstration of love!

A man's legalistic/contractual understanding of divine-human relationships is shattered by an unexpected event of complete forgiveness that comes from beyond himself. Martin Luther said the foundational truth of the Reformation in Europe was not repentance out of fear, but repentance as a result of love.

### **What happens next? Further demonstrations of the father's love**

The father now speaks to his servants who must have followed him as he raced down the road to the edge of the village. They are standing watching all this. They are told to do four things:

#### **1. They are told to dress the son as servants dress a king!**

The son doesn't need to bathe and change out of his rags. With the robe on, no one will see the rags. This order to dress the younger son ensures proper respect from the servants in future. It was natural that they would want to know how to treat this son. It is a sign of honour. Remember in the story of Esther, Haman asks the king what he thinks the king should do for the man the king wants to honour. The answer is, **"Have him dressed in royal robes that the king has worn"**. (Esther 6:1-9) So the younger son will attend a banquet wearing his father's most elegant robe. This robe is almost certainly the one his father wore on special feast days and other grand occasions. So the robe assures the whole community that acceptance and reconciliation have occurred. As the younger son attends the banquet clothed in his father's most elegant robe, the guests that night will recognise the robe and understand how much the father wants to honour the son.

In Is. 61:10 it says, ***"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness ...."*** We too are offered a clean garment of forgiveness and imputed righteousness.

2. **A signet ring was put on his finger.**

This means he is to be trusted completely. Pharaoh also gave Joseph robes and a ring. (Gen. 41:41-42) The giving of this ring must have been very galling to the older brother, for now his brother had a certain degree of authority in managing the rest of the family's wealth which now belonged to the older son. When the younger son used the signet ring it showed he was acting under the power and authority of his father. The signet ring of the new covenant is the Holy Spirit – see Eph. 4:30.

3. **Shoes are brought for his feet.**

Again this is probably a symbol of rank. Slaves went barefoot (Is. 20:2-4). Sons wore shoes!

The village is made up of a number of different groups:

- family relations
- family servants
- other villagers
- village elders

The father is carefully re-establishing the younger son's broken relationships. The servants were told to robe him. The initial welcome at the village entrance restores the relationship with the village. The ring restores the relationship with family relatives.

4. **A banquet - *"The fatted calf and eating and being merry"***

All the village elders and the extended family will be there and probably the whole village. A calf would feed about a hundred people. Meat is a rare delicacy in a village. Remember there was no refrigeration so it had to be eaten in a day! So this was one grand banquet! So all in the village must enjoy the joy of the father at the reconciliation with his son. The son will be reconciled to the whole village.

Eating with guests is a very big issue even today in the Middle East. Still in some Bedouin families there is a 'covenant nature' of killing an animal for the sake of a guest. A Bedouin host honours his guest by killing a sheep on the threshold of his house and inviting his guest to step over the blood with him. This is the highest honour and the deepest sign of reconciliation and friendship. In East Bank Jordan the most dignified and cordial expression of inviting a guest is, "If God ever favours us with a visit from you, we will kill a '*zebihat*' " (a blood-covenant sacrifice).

So in rejoicing over his son's return and as a sign of a new covenant between the father and son, the father provided a '*zebihat*'. The feast cements the reconciliation between the son and the community. He who ***"was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found"*** is now integrated back into the community.

Perverved pride could have made this son "too humble" for sonship. But he accepts pure grace - so grace wins! The son accepts pure grace and this acceptance moves him from irresponsibility to a new freedom. The relationship with his father is restored. So it is not a picture of a servant who plans to confess and compensate! The father demonstrates unexpected, costly love and as a result the "servant" is overwhelmed by grace and becomes a son! So Jesus was teaching that repentance is the acceptance of God's grace and a confession of unworthiness.

**Where is the Cross/the Atonement in this parable?**

In the going out of the lost son and his restoration in relationship with his father, we have a very revealing parallel to the way trodden by the Lord Jesus - His work of atonement, His humiliation and His joy at restored relationships.

You don't easily understand this unless you understand an honour-shame society and the very deep humiliation and cost the father paid - an amazing demonstration of unexpected love!

This was the only way **to restore relationships** with this son. The father gave the freedom for him to leave (absorbing the great shame). He endured the mockery of some as he watched daily for his son's return. When the father ran from his house in such a dramatic way, he demonstrated - at least partially - the meaning of the Incarnation and the Atonement.

What if the father hadn't behaved in such a way? He would have had another servant, but no son. As we will see, he already had one servant-type son in his house. He didn't want another! So he decides to go out in a shattering, humiliating demonstration of love that his son will see. He hopes he may understand that what the father wants is a "real" son – not a servant.

### **A summary of the path of the younger son's journey**

1. The father pays the price of reconciliation by continuing to endure the agony of rejected love.
2. The son comes to the end of his resources. In a moment of truth he sees and admits to himself where his pride has brought him.
3. He starts back, admitting that he is wrong and hoping yet to save himself.
4. The father demonstrates very unexpected love in self-emptying humiliation.
5. Shattered, the son surrenders completely and offers no alternative for their ongoing relationship.
6. The son confesses personal unworthiness.
7. The father offers reconciliation and sonship.
8. The son accepts in genuine humility, knowing all is a gift of pure grace.
9. The son probably accepts the responsibility of sonship with a new heart. Now he knows, accepts and returns his father's love. Now service is not a means of gaining merit, but rather an opportunity joyfully accepted as a means of expressing his love and thanks.
10. He enters the family home and accepts living with and loving his unlovely brother.

### **What about the older son?**

***"He was angry and refused to go in."*** (v. 28)

The word 'elder' is '*presbuteros*' - the same word used for elders of the people – used in connection with the Scribes. So there is no mistaking who this son represents. He draws near the house - perhaps in the late afternoon as he comes home from the fields. What he hears, to his great surprise, is a loud, boisterous, joyous celebration – music, pipes and singing.

Usually the music starts when the cooking starts. It is a signal that a feast is being prepared. So people begin to arrive. They sing, dance and drink wine until it is time to eat. Eating and drinking will go on half the night. The sound of music is a signal that things are in progress.

The older son is **suspicious**. Normally a son would run into the house and eagerly join in the party whatever its cause. From the type of music he knows it is a party. His failure to rush in shows his unnatural suspicions. He asks a young boy (the Arabic translation) what is going on. He doesn't ask a servant of the house, but one of a group of young boys who have congregated outside the door of the main courtyard. They are probably fooling around, kicking up dust, clowning around etc. They are not part of the party, but they have good expectations of getting some leftovers!

So the older son asks one of these small boys, "What's going on?" The boy answers, "Your father ...." (We know he is not a household servant or he would say, "My master") The verb "ask" in verse 26 is in the imperfect tense and implies that he kept on asking until he got an answer from the young boy. What will he do now?

### Custom demands his presence at the party

At such a party the older son has a semi-official responsibility - moving among the guests, making sure everybody has enough to eat and drink and is happy – a sort of head waiter. This is typical in the Middle East for it says, "You, our guests, are so great that even our oldest son is your servant".

In Iran the oldest son stands barefoot at the door on such occasions in order to greet each guest as they arrive. In parts of the Arab World the oldest son does not eat at all during the party because he is expected to be so busy. He offers the choice pieces of meat to the guests and says, "Eat this for my sake." But for the older brother on this occasion the honoured guest was his younger brother. The thought of serving his brother was not endurable.

So custom dictates that the older son should go into the party and take charge. His presence affirms to all the guests his support for his father in honouring his younger brother. If he wants to fight with his father over his decision, he should **never, ever** do it in public. He should go in, fulfil his role as a host, publicly embrace and congratulate his brother, displaying joy at getting his brother back again. Then, after the party is over and the guests have gone home, he can have a huge, private family row. This is not what he did.

The older brother is angry for several reasons. Perhaps the greatest is that his brother is reinstated without the penalty that honour demands. His father is making a fool of himself. The older son chooses to **humiliate his father** in public by quarrelling while the guests are present. In Middle Eastern culture, the older son's actions are extremely insulting. Note what happened to Queen Vashti in the Book of Esther (ch. 1). King Ahasuerus summoned her to a banquet and she refused to come. The King was **"enraged and his anger burned within him"**. Her refusal to go to the banquet got her deposed from the throne!

There is an interesting story from Yemen. An Amir (prince) had much land below the Ma'rib dam (reputed to be built by the Queen of Sheba). Water from the dam irrigated lots of good agricultural land. In the 3rd century AD the dam began to collapse. The Amir knew the dam was seriously weak and that if it broke, it would make his land worthless. So he wanted to sell his land at a good price **before** the dam burst. But he had a dilemma. If he tried to sell, people would get suspicious and the price would drop. So he invited all the important people to a big banquet and arranged with his oldest son to insult him publicly in front of all his guests. When this charade was enacted, the Amir was extremely angry and in front of all the guests, he tried to kill his son. The guests intervened and prevented the Amir from killing his son. In the end the Amir agreed not to kill his son, but publicly stated before them all that he could not live in a city where he had been so badly insulted by his son. The next day he sold all his property and lands at a good price and moved away with his whole family - including the son. A few weeks later the dam burst!

The father in the parable has two sons. The younger one had insulted his father in front of the whole village. Now the older son humiliates his father in front of the whole village. The guests and those listening to this story expect that the father's heart will burn with anger (as in the case of the Amir) and that he will punish his son in some harsh way. The situation is very serious because all this takes place publicly during a banquet. So this rebellion is just as serious as the rebellion of the younger son.

### What does the father do when he is so insulted?

To everyone's huge surprise, for the second time in a day, the father gets up, leaves the party and goes outside the gate to speak to his son. He doesn't shout and yell, but comes to **plead** with his son! For a second time the father demonstrates a willingness to endure shame and self-emptying in order to seek reconciliation. So the father loves both sons indiscriminately.

Now we come to the focus of the parable - the heart of the story of the older son. And the older son completely and utterly condemns himself. When confronted by the unexpected love of his father the younger son really repents. The father shows again this completely unexpected love for his older son. Will the older son's heart be moved, leading him to repent? Sadly no - at least not immediately. There is no repentance/confession but two complaints! The father's agony of rejected love is all the more keen with the older son because of this son's nearness. He had to pay the price in great shame to reconcile the younger son. Now he has to

pay the same price in humiliation in order to have a son. Humiliation is unnecessary for a servant. He can beat him. He can only do one thing in order to win his son - show grace. Remember the whole village is listening to what is happening. This will be a topic of conversation for years to come.

### Note what happens

- The older son doesn't use any title when speaking to his father. (Titles have been used so far in this story.) This is being rude in Middle Eastern culture - a second insult to his father. He should have said, "O, my father".
- The older son demonstrates the attitude and spirit of a slave. He says, **"I have *slaved for you*"**. He had been living with his father all this time, but with the spirit of a slave and not with the love and affection of a son. His attitude is, "I have worked for you so long, where are my wages?" The atmosphere is that of a labour dispute.
- He has just publicly shamed his father and yet he says, **"I have *never disobeyed your command*"**. But above all, he had failed to love and honour his father! The younger son was rebellious **outwardly** while absent from the home, but the older son was rebellious **inwardly** while he was in the home.
- The older son accuses the father of favouritism, **"You never gave me a kid, yet he gets a calf!"** The implication is, "You obviously love this worthless fellow more than me." All the unmerited love the father has continued to show him is ignored. It is a very unfair criticism.
- The older son, in effect, declares he no longer wants to be part of the family. He is disgusted with his father and now also with his younger brother. He wants to make merry with his friends - if not in a far country, at least far away from the home!
- He denies that he has any relationship with his brother or with his father, **"This son of yours"** - not 'my brother'. In fact he is 'outcasting' himself from his family. Emotionally he has left for 'the far country'.
- The older brother tells us his concept of 'joy' - not his brother back from the dead, but a party away with **his** friends.
- He accuses his younger brother. In effect he says to his father, "He doesn't love you. How could he when he devoured your property with prostitutes?" The older son is caught in a trap of his own making. **"He devoured your property with prostitutes"**. So he refuses to acknowledge that the 1/3rd portion given by his father to the son was really the younger son's do with as he pleased. The older son feels he doesn't have the right to use his 2/3rds, but he wants to. So he sees himself as a servant, not a son. But the degree of the younger son's immorality isn't mentioned in the story. The older brother just made it up. It is a very serious allegation. If it is true, the younger son should be killed according to Mosaic Law. (Deut. 21:18-21) So the older son distorts the facts. The father has an older son whose attitudes and relationships are very perverted. Sadly, his heart is full of envy, pride, bitterness, sarcasm, anger, resentment, self-centredness, hate, stinginess, self-satisfaction and self-deception. Yet he probably thinks himself "righteous" and "honourable".

Note that all this took place in public – guests, servants and the gang of boys would all be listening. Perhaps the older son is speaking to the audience as much as to his father. He wants to defend his sense of honour.

### How does the father react?

Everyone expects him to react with anger and fury! But what comes out again from the father is an outpouring of love. Note the following:

1. There is an appeal to the older brother to rejoice in his brother's return. But the older brother's joy is focused on his stomach. The father is trying to point out that real joy is in **restored relationships**.
2. The father assures the older son that his rights to the property are fully protected even though pure grace has been given to the younger brother. His rights are not affected in any way.

3. The father also points out to the son that being in a 'servant' category is not appropriate for a son. So his answer to, "***I have served you .....***" is, "You are the heir. You own everything. How can I possibly give you more?" No master would ever go out of a party to extend love to an insolent servant! Look at the dialogue between the father and the older son:

Older son: "You never gave me a kid."

Father: "All that I have is yours."

Older son: "Yes, but I don't have the right of disposition. I **own** everything, but I am not free to spend as I like."

Father: "O, I see, you also want me dead!"

The dialogue doesn't get this far in words, but this is what is implied. So sadly, **both** brothers wished their father dead.

4. The father's answer is really to help us understand the nature of grace. It is not an apology, for that would never happen in an honour-shame society. An appeal of love is the father's only option. Punishing won't help. Ignoring the issue won't help either, for the older brother remains a servant. So the father makes a verbal appeal of love and restoration with the hope of regaining this son as well.

So Jesus is really painting a picture of the two basic types of sinful people:

- The rebellious who are outside the law
- The rebellious who are inside the law – i.e. the religious people

Both are rebels.

Both break the father's heart.

Both end up in 'the far country' - one physically and one emotionally.

Both have amazing, unexpected love demonstrated through the willingness of the father to suffer shame and humiliation.

Both have love and grace given to them. This is the critical factor that turns slaves into sons.

Neither really repents, but the father goes out to both. One brother is found. The other? Well, we don't know! Did the older brother go and join the party or did he remain outside?

Jesus never finished the story! Jesus leaves the story in mid-air! The tense guests wait in the house to see if the older son will give up his rebellion and enter the house in humility. Why didn't Jesus finish the story? We can only speculate. Jesus was speaking to a group of proud, "religious" people and it was these people who were primarily responsible for the Cross. But now, before the Cross, was a chance for them to repent and turn to the Lord Jesus. If, in the hardness of their hearts, they reject His love, they increase His suffering.

One possible ending to the story is this: "The older son in very great anger took a stick and beat his father." That is the ending of the story of the Cross.

So here is a depiction of "religious people":

- They are filled with a horrible spirit of envy and jealousy. [See Prov. 27:4 and 6:34-35]
- They find their religious service drudgery and not a delight.
- They are dominated by **self** – self-righteous, self-centred, full of self-pity and self-satisfied.
- They are filled with ingratitude – note: the older son had already received the 2/3rds of his inheritance.
- They are not concerned with the "lost" (those who break the law).

The older son depicts religious people covering their real nature and the sin of self-pity - having a grievance against God. You often find this spirit of grievance in the Muslim World - against each other, in the mosque, between different sects of Islam and different Muslim countries, against leadership and ultimately against God. People are angry with God. The spirit of grievance is

drenched in self-pity – as in this story. Self-pity destroys our happiness and our unity. It restricts our vision to ourselves. It distorts our values.

But in this story you have a “cure” for religious people:

- An appreciation of God's abiding presence
- A knowledge of God's abundant provision
- An involvement in God's great purpose - a united (all peoples and nations), functional family!

So each hearer of the parable must decide what his/her response will be! The missing conclusion depends on which brother you relate to - the younger brother or the older brother? Have you been found and restored?

### **Themes in the Parable**

1. **Sin**

There are two basic types of sinful people - the religious and the irreligious. The two sons illustrate their sin and its results.

2. **Repentance**

Two types of repentance are demonstrated. One is the repentance of the man who thinks he can save himself. The other is the repentance of the man who knows he cannot.

3. **Grace**

The parable illustrates the nature of God's freely offered love and tells of its very great cost that God himself bore. It is a love that seeks and suffers in order to save.

4. **Joy**

Joy is known in finding and celebrating communally the restoration of lost ones.

5. **Sonship**

One son is restored from death and from being a servant. Perhaps the second son insists on remaining a servant.

### **A summary**

The father's younger son requests and receives possession and the right of disposal of his inheritance. This is highly unusual and completely counter-cultural. The implication is that he wants his father dead. The father is expected to punish the son. Rather than punish the son, the father grants his request in an unprecedented act of love. The older son refuses to be reconciled. Both sons fail even to try to live together in unity.

The younger son sells up, leaves and loses all. He sees his sin as a loss of money. Reduced to herding pigs for a Gentile and faced with eating bitter carob beans, he decides to go home. His plan is to work as a hired servant and live in the village community. He intends to save his honour and so himself.

On his return, the younger son is overwhelmed by the very unexpected, visible demonstration of love by his father who so drastically humiliates himself. The son is stunned by the offer of grace. Shattered, he confesses his unworthiness and accepts restoration to sonship in genuine humility. He understands now that his sin is a broken relationship that he cannot restore. The village community rejoices together.

The older son then insults his father publicly and demonstrates that he is just as lost as his brother. His father extends the same love to this son by humiliating himself, but there is no confession and repentance. The opposite happens as the older son tirades against his father. The story closes with a final appeal to this son for reconciliation. The question implied for the hearers is: “Which son are you?”