

The Father's House

Luke 15:11-32

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Jolene Horn, in writing for Today's Christian Woman magazine, tells about reading her daughter the parable of Jesus which we have just read together. She writes, "While putting my 4-year-old daughter to bed one evening, I read her the story of the Prodigal Son. We discussed how the young son had taken his inheritance and left home, living it up until he had nothing left. Finally, when he couldn't even eat as well as pigs, he went home to his father, who welcomed him. When we finished the story, I asked my daughter what she had learned. After thinking a moment, she quipped, 'Never leave home without your credit card!'"

That is one way to try and make it work. And I'm sure that some people wish it was that easy to leave the Father's house, but anyone who really has run away to the far country knows that it is not that simple. The results of living away from God are always disastrous, and nothing can prevent the ultimate consequences from catching up with us. The reason is that God's ways are the way of life and joy, and the way of rebellion is the way of self-destruction and ruin. The farther away we run, the worse the destruction becomes. As exciting as the outside world appears, the Father's house is where real life and love are experienced. The world is the illusion; the Father's home is the reality.



Let's take a look at this very interesting story that Jesus tells. I want us to look at the three main characters of the story, and learn something about ourselves and our heavenly Father. **First, let's look at the father in the story. The father represents God, our Father.** But we are surprised that God would act like this father. He does nothing to stop the son from taking advantage of him. He does not lecture him or warn him. He doesn't even try to keep him from leaving home and engaging in behaviors he knows will be destructive to the young man's life. In no way does he keep him from doing anything he wants to do. When he asks for the estate to be settled before the father's death — the ultimate insult in that culture — the father says nothing by way of objection. He simply gives him what would have eventually come to him in the estate.

One of the disturbing things about God, for some people, is his refusal to step in and stop us or others from doing what is wrong. He has a non-interference policy. We hear people say, "**Why doesn't God do something about the evil in the world? Why doesn't he stop people from hurting other people or doing evil things?**" But God has given us the awesome gift of free will. If he interfered in any way, it would no longer be free will. We think we would like God to be more controlling — that is, when it comes to other people. We would like to have him force them to do the right things and stop them from doing wrong things. But when we want to rebel we don't want anyone trying to control us. However, God knows that the moment he forces us to do his will, it is no longer we who are obeying, and therefore it means nothing. *If obedience is something that happens because we are coerced, then it is pointless. If we do God's will*

willingly from the heart then we delight the heart of God.

One thing that is important to understand in this story is that in the culture of Jesus' day, children did not leave home when they married and became adults. The father simply added on to the house, especially if the estate was larger. To leave home was to leave everything — your extended family, relationships, work, and future.

The father in the story did not want his son to stay home if the son did not want to stay. He did not want him to be there out of some kind of obligation. And the father certainly did not want his son to be there just waiting for him to die so that he could get his hands on the inheritance. The father did not acquiesce out of weakness. He was not just being a permissive parent. He was giving the son what the son thought he wanted, in the hope that someday he would want something else — something better. Only if he saw the emptiness of living away from the father would he want to return to the father willingly. Only if he experienced what it was like to be away from the father's love would the desire for that love begin to grow.

In the story, the father does not go to the distant country in search of his son. He will not rescue him against his will. He will let him go until he has discovered for himself that the world is not the great and wonderful place it seemed to be. In his pursuit of pleasure, pain will be the young man's constant companion until the images of the world's allurements are replaced by the images of a home where he was loved and valued.

We can look at this story and see the foolishness of this boy. The error of his way is so clear, and we can see the results of his destructive lifestyle before they even come about. But when you are in the middle of that situation, it is not so easy to see. The world looks so appealing, and people seem so free and having such a good time. You think you are invincible, and you are immune from the destruction that takes place in other people's lives. You are smarter than they are. Those things will never happen to you. But they do happen to you. What goes around comes around. Or, in the words of the Bible: ***"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life"*** (Galatians 6:7-8). The wise person accepts that truth and lives his/her life accordingly. The foolish person insists on testing that truth by experience before he will believe it. That is what the young son did.

One thing that begins to dawn on us as we continue to read the story is that the father has been looking for the son all along. He did not let him go because he did not care. He has been looking and he has been longing. Every day he checks the horizon for some sign that his son is on his way back home. And when his son's silhouette finally does appear in the distance, the father recognizes it immediately and takes off running. He can hardly wait to throw his arms around him. There is not the slightest hint of a lecture or ridicule. There is no guilt-trip. Neither is there talk of the pain caused or the debt owed. There is only joy that the son has returned home of his own free will.

Secondly, let's look into the mind and heart of this young man who decided to leave home. We see this kind of thing so often. A young person has parents who care for him/her, but they cannot wait to break free and be on their own. Their parents want the best for them, but they see their lives as restricted and controlled. The world looks really exciting and they tire of hearing their father or mother talk about the dangers and the wrongness of what is going on in the world. But when they leave, pain will be their constant companion. They will look for more and more ways to dull the pain. They will try everything. They will think of everything — everything except the thing which is a cure for the pain. They will go everywhere — everywhere except home where they are loved and valued for the person they are.

It is interesting that this young man thought he was on his own. "It's my life and my money," he told himself. It says that he "squandered his wealth in wild living." But it was not his wealth. Actually, he was living off of his father's resources the whole time. He would have had to work a lifetime to get that much money. He was squandering his inheritance and throwing away that which had been intended to provide

him with a future. He wasn't really on his own at all. Everything he was doing was made possible by his father. The prostitutes and parties were paid for out of his father's pocket. But isn't that true of all of us? We use the resources our heavenly Father has given to us to rebel against our heavenly Father. We say, "It is my life and my money." But the Bible says, **"For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).** God has given you a life, a brain, freedom, prosperity, health, athletic ability, a good home or good looks, and what have you done with the Father's gifts? Have you squandered his resources, or used them in the way the Father intended that **"You might have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10)?**

The worst part of this young man's life is not that he went away to the far country and spent the father's resources in sinful living. No, the worst part of this young man's life is that he never developed a relationship with his father. If he had, he would never have left home. He never understood how much his father loved him. He never figured out that what was available to him at home was more than all the pleasure and money in the world. He would not believe that his father wanted the best for him and had great plans for him. We might be tempted to blame all this on the father, but remember that the father in the story represents God. He is perfect in his love and wisdom. If the father had been controlling and manipulative he would never have let the son go in the first place. There is not a single word said against the father. This young man had rejected his father without reason. He had lived with him all those years and never knew him. He certainly did not understand all that the father had planned for him. He nearly ruined his life, and would have if he had not "come to his senses." He had lost his rightful mind. He had become morally and spiritually insane, but he finally came to his senses. **It began when he decided to admit his stupidity and sinfulness.** He decided to go back to his father and say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." **That's all it takes, and when we come to that place we too are ready to go back home.**

Well, there is a third person in the story — another son. He was the eldest. He was the good boy. He never left home. When his father asked him to do something, he did it. He never rebelled or ran away. He looked down his nose at his errant brother. He had full expectations of being the head of the estate and inheriting everything that was left — in spite of the fact that there was a sizable hole financially in the estate, since his father had given half of it away to his younger brother. He was glad that his younger brother was gone. It would be easier now. He felt a little smug. **He had been the obedient son and he deserved all this. He had earned it.**

There was only one problem. He shared a critical character flaw with his younger brother: he never actually got to know his father. He had not really developed a love relationship with him. He was dutiful and faithful. He worked hard and was dependable. But he did what he did because it made him feel proud of his own accomplishments, rather than out of a sense of love for the father. And when the father showed that he still cared for his wayward brother, he became angry and bitter. He saw it as the ultimate injustice. He accused his father of wrong. He made his father out to be unfair. He thought he was the one who deserved a party — not this miscreant who smelled of pig manure. He talked to his father like he was stupid and intentionally wrong in his judgment. He charged him with favoritism. He didn't understand that it was not about who had been good and who had been bad, it was about who was dead and was now alive. It was not a matter of who was deserving, it was about who was in need. But the older brother's concern was about justice, and he never understood that his father's concern was about grace.

This is a problem for us good church folk. Every Sunday we get up and get dressed for church. We take our place in the pew and put in our dollar. We sing the hymns and serve on the committees. We serve the dinners and attend the special programs. We are moral and decent human beings who obey the laws of the land and the laws of the Bible. And then, along comes someone who is fresh from the street, weighed down with sins. They say one prayer and everyone is excited — in fact, more excited than they are about those who have been in the Lord's house forever and faithfully doing the Lord's work. Like the older brother, it is easy to become bitter and angry that parties are being thrown for those who were out in sin, and just stepped into the Father's house. It sort of galls us that Jesus said, **"I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).** "Yes, but is there rejoicing over someone who doesn't need to repent?" we say. But again, we are not playing good boys,

bad boys or good girls, bad girls. We are involved in a spiritual struggle of life and death. Someone who was dead has found life, and it is fitting that we rejoice.

Jesus originally told this story to show there is hope for everyone, and that it is not a question of whether we deserve to be in the Father's house, because the truth is that none of us do. He was contrasting the faithful religious people of that day to the sinners who were turning to God. The point was that neither of them had a relationship with the Father — in spite of all the religion in some of their lives. The point was that one group had “come to their senses” and returned home to establish a relationship with the Father from whom they had been estranged. The religious folk, instead of rejoicing, were incensed. They were angry and bitter. In their minds they deserved God's favor, but they had never really experienced the Father's love.

I began tossing this parable over in my mind. I tried to imagine possible endings to the story. At first I thought the story probably ended with the young son who had rebelled coming back into the household, but only as a servant. After all, he had spent his inheritance and he didn't deserve anything else. He would serve his father, and then his older brother when the father passed away. He would live the rest of his life as a hired servant, just as he said. But the father in the story puts a ring on his finger and a special robe on his back. He throws a banquet. So it becomes obvious that the father has other ideas, and has no intention of making him a slave.

The second ending I came up with was that the older brother finally gave in and forgave his younger brother. He shared the inheritance with him and they both lived in the father's house as brothers once again. But the interesting thing in the story is that the oldest son stays outside the house. He never comes in. There is singing, drinking, eating, dancing and partying, but the Bible says, ***“The older brother became angry and refused to go in” (Luke 15:28).*** The father even went out and pleaded with him — something he had not done with his younger brother — but he was outraged. He refused to be reconciled to his brother or his father.

Then it dawned on me what the most likely ending to the story was: the older brother became increasingly bitter against the father and left his house, and the younger brother inherited everything. This is exactly what happened historically. Those who wanted to deserve God's favor by their obedience have rejected God's grace, and a relationship with him built on grace. They became bitter against the Father and accused him of wrong. They rejected Jesus, the incarnation of God's grace. They hated Jesus for loving sinners and attending parties in their homes. And in their hatred, they killed him, thinking they would inherit everything. But in so doing, they lost everything, and the kingdom belongs to Christ and those who have followed him into the Father's house where there is feasting, singing and dancing.

Fredrick Buechner, in his book The Alphabet of Grace, tells about Mark Twain at the end of his days, as he describes him, “riddled with guilt and fame.” Late in life Twain wrote, “There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream — a grotesque, foolish dream. Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought — a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities.” The Christian message is the opposite of Twain's message of despair. It tells us that life is real, we are real, God is real, and that we are not homeless, wandering vagrants, but people with a home — the Father's home where we are welcomed, embraced and, yes, celebrated. **The Father's house has become our house — our eternal home.**