

[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 4

March 30, 2025

Two Lost Sons

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

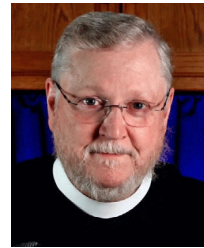
¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: . . .

“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ ²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was



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lost, and is found.”

The parable in today’s text speaks of a father and his two sons. The younger son is bored with the life and the discipline of his father’s house and demands his portion of the inheritance. A few days later he packs up all his belongings, leaves home, and travels to a distant country.

This younger son is the picture of a child of God who grows weary of life under the heavenly Father’s guidance and control. Putting any thoughts of God’s kindness and mercy out of his mind, he casts off all regard for God’s authority and breaks loose from His restraint. He considers himself entitled to a larger share of the pleasures of this world and imagines that he can best enjoy himself by severing his connection with the heavenly Father. He turns a deaf ear to God’s warnings and admonitions, and takes up residence in the sinful world far from his Father. There he hopes to be free from God’s control. There he hopes to do whatever he pleases to enjoy life.

In that far-off country the younger son soon gathered around him a group of fair-weather friends. They knew the ways of that country; they would show him how to enjoy himself. Nothing was too costly, nothing too low to be indulged in. This was living indeed! Little did this son realize how he was squandering his possessions and courting disaster.

It doesn’t take this Prodigal Son long to spend his last farthing. Then catastrophe strikes. A famine sets in, and the cost of food soars. At first this doesn’t bother him much. He can always fall back on his friends. But they have their own problems and can’t bother with him. Everyone gives him the “brush-off.” In desperation he finally takes a job feeding pigs. He had fallen as low as he could fall.

When a person severs his connection with his heavenly Father, he looks forward with great anticipation to reveling in the things of this world. And, for awhile, he may enjoy himself. But before long he learns the transient nature of ungodly prosperity and pleasure. All he had hoped to gain and enjoy slips through his fingers and leaves only misery and heartache in its place. He strives more desperately to prolong his existence in the sinful world. His faith and principles are gone, and so he sinks lower and lower until he becomes a slave to sin. Jesus warns us that those who continue in sin are slaves to sin (John 8:34). In vain such a one seeks help *in his despair*, from the people of the world. But he learns that the world never keeps its promises. He grows more and more despicable and miserable and finally faces nothing but damnation.

Finally this wayward son in the parable comes to his senses. He remembers his home and his father’s loving care. He realizes that he never should have left his father’s home. He finally understands that if he is to be helped, he must go back to his father’s house.

Now that his eyes have been opened, the profligate son declares: "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say unto him: Father, I have sinned." So he intends to voice his



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repentance and his earnest longing for forgiveness. Full, frank, free, and open shall be his confession of his sins. Asking nothing of his father except to be forgiven, willing to take his place merely as a hired servant, he resolves to pour out his whole soul before him and to cast himself completely upon his father's kindness. Clothed in rags, eyes sunken, cheeks hollow, lips parched and cracked, he returns to his father just as he is.

The grace of God can soften the hardest heart and give a happy turn to the strongest stream of corruption. When the sinner finally comes to repentance, he hates the evil he once loved. He shrinks from the bad company that formerly delighted him. He turns from his sinful pleasures with loathing and alarm, as if they were poison. He doesn't merely sit among the swine and the filth of sin and bewail his fate, but he arises with the firm decision to return to his heavenly Father. True repentance consists primarily in rising and going back to the heavenly Father. A truly repentant sinner recognizes his sins and is willing to confess them; and realizing that he is unworthy to receive any favor from God, he decides to humble himself before God and plead only for mercy and to hope for forgiveness.

Finally, after a long, arduous journey, the wayward son comes in sight of his former home. How ashamed he is of his present pitiful condition! Longingly, he looks toward home as his weary feet carry him slowly closer. Suddenly, he sees a figure hurrying toward him. That figure seems familiar – no, it can't be – but, it is! It's his father rushing out to meet him! He falls to his knees before him and begins his confession. But the father gathers him up in his arms just as he is and kisses him. He hardly listens to his confession, for he sees and knows that his son has come back to him. And his actions demonstrate his immediate and complete forgiveness. He is silent concerning his son's shameful past, just as if it had never existed. At his orders the festal robes are brought, and the rejoicing guests gather. The father's welcome exceeds the son's fondest dream. He is reinstated once more as his father's son.

In this wonderful picture, Jesus has painted for us the most attractive and perfect image of our heavenly Father. Through it He assures us that His Father is willing to forgive every repentant sinner, even the lowest and the vilest, if he will only return to Him. Not one sinner is rejected, for Jesus Christ came to earth as the "Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world." This is the Gospel message that "God is not willing that any should perish," for "He would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." This parable sets forth the riches of Gospel grace to encourage every poor sinner to repent and to return to his heavenly Father. Let no one despair; here is hope and forgiveness for all. Why doubt, why hesitate? If you have strayed away, return today and taste of the joy of your Father's forgiveness.

The father in Jesus' parable, of course, had two sons; not only the wayward one, who finally returned, but also an older one who had never left. This older brother was out in the



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field when the younger one returned. Toward evening, as he returned to the house, he heard the sounds of merrymaking. So he asked of one of the servants what this celebration was all about. He was told that his younger brother had returned and that his father had forgiven him and taken him back into the family. When he heard that, he refused to go in and share in the joy. He was angry that his father had forgiven his younger brother.

What is Jesus is trying to point out to the scribes and Pharisees with this parable? That the tax collectors and sinners, whom they despised, were made of the same flesh and blood as they were. They were therefore their brothers, children of the same heavenly Father. Therefore, they, as elder brothers in the Faith, ought to rejoice when these straying children returned home in repentance and faith and were forgiven.

That older brother, by the way, is still with us. Many in the church have no understanding of sin and redemption. They fail to understand that God sent His only Son into this world "to seek and to save that which was lost." God rejoices in the return of a sinner. Scripture says: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). His forgiveness wipes out every stain of sin, for "the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). His forgiveness restores each individual to the place he had before he fell.

Some self-righteous individuals become angry when God's forgiveness is extended to a poor repentant sinner and when that sinner is taken back into the church. They are quick to point out the wayward son's transgressions and all the good deeds they themselves have done. They make much of the fact that they have never fallen away from the church, or that they have never been guilty of the kind of sins that others have committed. What they fail to see is that their self-righteous heart has strayed far from their heavenly Father and that they, too, are in need of repentance and forgiveness.

Though this elder brother never strayed from home, still he, too, was a wayward son, for in spirit he had wandered far from his father's side. He ran his brother down as a sinner, completely oblivious of the fact that he himself was a sinner as well. He boastfully asserted that he had never transgressed a commandment, and failed to consider his own guilt. His selfishness and lack of love for his brother clearly marked him as a hypocrite. His wayward brother returned of his own free will, while his father had to plead with him to come in.

The person who has an exaggerated idea of his own character and shows a merciless attitude toward his brother is himself a lost son. By his heartless indifference to the regaining of a brother he also reveals his own need of repentance and forgiveness. But, thanks be to God, our heavenly Father is also patient and gentle in His pleading with such a self-righteous son, for the simple reason that He also wants him to come in and be saved. Dear friend, if, like this elder son, you have strayed from the Father's side, may the Father's gentle pleading move you to return to Him in repentance. May His pleading find



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a response in your heart, that there may be joy among the angels of God over yet another sinner who has repented. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen