

## Luke 15: 11-32 Two Ways to be Lost

A good study is predominated by questions, not monologues, but it's important for you to have a thorough understanding of the passage and point of the study. Please read and understand this essay for your own knowledge, and then lead the study by asking the questions which follow. Keep it lively, interactive and feel free to customize to suit your audience.

This parable, commonly known as the 'prodigal son', is well known for the younger son being 'lost then found', but another major purpose of Jesus telling this parable is to show an even more dangerous way to be lost: being lost in religion. The story of the older brother is often glossed over, but perhaps is the main point of the parable, given the audience to which Jesus was teaching and the way the parable ends. It is a parable that those who have 'grown up in church' need to hear and consider.

The Younger Brother's Lostness - vs 11-20a The younger brother's request to receive his inheritance was, in essence, saying to the father, "I wish you were dead". The shocking dishonor this was to the father is only overshadowed by the shock that the father actually fulfills the son's request. The son squanders the father's wealth in wild living, but then finds himself as hired help, in a foreign land, feeding pigs, and wishing he could eat the pig's food. This picture of desperate need shows what happens when we turn away in rebellion from our heavenly father. There may be fun for a season, but it is never satisfying. It will always leave us unhappy and desperate.

The son 'comes to his senses' (vs. 17) and then conjures a plan to return to the Father not as his child, for he thinks himself unworthy of this position now, but as a 'hired hand'.

The Father's Forgiveness vs. 20b-24 Before the father even has time to hear the son's plan, the father sees his repentant son 'a long way off' and runs to him. The father's forgiveness, given freely and completely, is not based on what the son did in showing contrition, but on his status as being loved by the father. His identity as a son was not earned, but given. The father throws a party, gives him a ring, and rejoices. So the father receives anyone who comes to him turning from sin. This certainly was a message Jesus wanted the "tax collectors and 'sinners'" in the audience (Luke 15:1) to hear.

The Older Brother's Lostness vs. 25-32 However, there was another group in the audience Jesus was speaking to that day. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were also in the crowd 'muttering' about Jesus (Luke 15:2) It was to them Jesus told the second half of the parable.

The older brother was away and when he came to the house he heard the party. After hearing the celebration was in his returned brother's honor, he was angry. He didn't come into the party. His father came out to him to invite him into the party. The older brother's reaction shows his true heart to the father.

<sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your

orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

The Older brother, although was physically with the father doing his work, was just as distant from the father as the younger brother. His work was not out of genuine love for the father.

In brilliant fashion, Jesus shows there are two ways to separate yourself from the father: by being very bad, and by being very good. The younger brother did the former, while the older brother was guilty of the later. The accusation to the Pharisee's in the crowd were obvious to everyone. Jesus was telling the Pharisees that they are separated from a relationship with the father because of their religious work. They were gaining their access to the father through their work rather than a loving relationship with him. The older brother's disdain for his younger brother was evidenced in the Pharisee's attitude in Luke 15:2. The result is they are left 'out of the party'.

Jesus again does something surprising, however. He doesn't finish the story. We never know if the older brother ever goes into the party. He leaves the story unfinished because he was challenging the Pharisee's to approach God differently, through relationship and love of the father, rather than earning his favor through good works.

The message to give to anyone who has been raised in church is the same. We don't gain access to the father through our religious work, but only through a love relationship with him. Our good works flow out of this relationship, not as an attempt to earn it.

Being separated from the father through 'righteous good works' is actually more dangerous because it's harder to see. Because we are not in the 'pig pen' of life we think we are ok, but the reality is we are outside the feast and not with the father.

Print these question, cut them out and sticking your Bible as a discrete guide for the discussion.

### Launch

Do you think of yourself a religious person? Why or why not?  
Explore

1. The younger son separates from the father by doing what?
2. What is the significance of asking for inheritance?
3. What is the significance of the terrible situation the younger son found himself in?
4. Vs 17 says "But when he came to himself" and he went back to the father with a plan to be accepted back as a servant. Did the Father accept his plan?
5. Who in Jesus' audience was relating to this character in the story?
6. The older brother's reaction was not one of acceptance of his brother. Why?
7. What is strikingly true of both the younger and the older brother?
8. Who did Jesus intend to relate to the older brother in his audience?
9. Did the older brother go into the party?

### Apply

10. Do you relate to the older or younger brother? Why?
11. The father declares of the younger son, "He was lost, but is found" (vs. 24). What was he lost from?
12. For those who relate the younger brother: Where are you in the younger brother's journey?
13. For those who relate to the older brother: Would you say you are inside or outside of the 'party'?
14. What do you think the 'party' represents?
15. Why can a religious person be in danger of being 'outside the party'?

Here are the answers, nice and simple. But be sure to read and understand the opening essay designed to give you background knowledge to lead well.

1. Asking for his inheritance, moving away, and living selfishly
2. It is as if he were wishing his father dead
3. Became a servant instead of a son, pigs were an unclean animal to the Jews, pleasure only lasted a season and then he was unsatisfied
4. No, the father took him back not as a servant but as a son giving him a ring, robe, and threw a party.
5. The 'sinners and the tax collectors' (Luke 15:1)
6. He felt it was unfair because he had worked for his Father his whole life and never been honored.
7. They both were separated from the father. One because of his bad deeds, one because of his good deeds. Both wanted to control his own life.
8. The 'Pharisees and scribes' or religious leaders (Luke 15:2)
9. We don't know, Jesus intentionally left the end of the story open-ended because he was calling the religious leaders to make the same choice . Will they rejoice that their sinning brothers were 'once lost, but now are found'.
10. Allow to answer for themselves
11. The father's house, protection, and love
12. May answer: Squandering father's wealth, in the pig-pen, coming home, partying with the father, etc
13. Allow to answer for themselves
14. Celebrating the unconditional acceptance from the Father
15. The religious can be depending on their good works to give them good standing before the father. They can actually think the Father owes them rather than celebrating the unconditional love of the Father.