A Tale of Two Sons
Luke 15:11-32

We're beginning this mini-series in what could be argued is the most famous parable in the Bible. And one of the reasons I love this parable is because it give us such an amazing picture of the Gospel—maybe more than any of the other parables. And another reason I love it is because everyone in this room can find themselves in this parable through either the story of the younger brother or the older brother. And this message is entitled a tale of two sons very intentionally. Far too often, this story is only remembered for the story of the son that leaves home. But, if we stop there, we will miss one of the crucial points of this parable that's communicated to us through the story of the old brother.

Now before we jump into the parable, it's important that we understand the audience that Jesus is addressing. And it you back up to the beginning of chapter 15, you'll see that he's talking to two groups of people. Read 15:1-2. So we've got two groups of people: tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes. Now tax collectors and sinners were known for being morally deplorable. They were bad. Tax collectors were hated because they known for taking more money than they were supposed to and supported the Roman government who was occupying the land God has promised Israel. Sinners represents people who were morally questionable or taboo—prostitutes, criminals, sorcerers, hustlers—in many cases just people who lived openly immoral lives.

So this is category one filled with outwardly bad people and then there's category two that consists of people who are outwardly good. The Pharisees and scribes were super religious. They kept the law to the nth degree. They were polished and educated. Many had memorized multiple books in the Old Testament. And they were proud of it! This is the definition of someone who's holier than thou. And so it goes without saying that they didn't like the sinners…and that why you see them grumbling in vs 2 that Jesus is hanging out with them. So there's some tension out the outset with these two groups of people in close proximity—the disobedient and filthy and the uber religious and polished and it's important that you keep this audience in mind because yes Jesus is teaching a parable, but it's aimed at specifically the two groups he's talking to and each one of the sons is going to represent on of these groups of people. So as we're walking through the text, try to figure out which group Jesus is addressing with each son's story.

And we learn about the younger brother first. He comes to his dad and says 12 "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." Now in the first century, when a Father died he would leave behind an inheritance which included his property and wealth to his sons. The older son would get 2/3 of the inheritance because the first born received a double portion and the younger brother in this case would get 1/3 of it. But the thing is that none of this happened until, the Father died! This isn't like a son asking for a few bucks as he goes off to college. By asking for his inheritance now, he's essentially wishing his Father dead. It's hard for us to understand how shameful wicked this was. Not only is he breaking his Father's heart but he's downgrading his social status in the community which was closely tied with the land you owned. Giving the son his portion of the inheritance now would mean selling that land, giving his son that money, and suffering a loss of reputation. And the Father does. He gives his inheritance, suffers all of the economic, relational, and emotional loss that comes with it, and a few days later he's watching his son ride off in the distance to the better life he wants for himself.

And he goes into a far country and lives it up! vs. 13 says he squanders his property with wreckless living…he just does whatever he wants to—lives however he feels like living…we know based on vs. 30 that there were probably some prostitutes involved in that. So this guy's life was one big party…until his money ran out, and when it did, not only was he broke, a severe famine arose in that country. And he had absolutely nothing. So what does he do? Vs 15 He hires himself out to one of the citizens of the land to feed pigs.

Pigs were unclean according to Jewish law so this job was particularly debase. And vs. 16 says he longed to eat the pig's food—and no one gave him any. And it's only after all of this that the text says in vs. 17 he came to himself and says, "how many of my Father's hired servants have more than enough bread but I perish here with hunger?"

And I don't want distract from the narrative here, but can I just say this is where life apart from the Father always leads? You see sin's fun but then it destroys you. It's like jumping out of a plane without a parachute, it's exhilarating it's a ton of fun, really a great—until it ends badly and it always does. That's life apart from the Father. He thought he could have some kind of abundant full life without the Father as long as he had his Father's blessings. This guy didn't want his father, he wanted his Father's resources he wanted his stuff. And I can't tell you how many people think about God like this; where we come to him as little more than a resource to bless us with the experiences circumstances we want for ourselves. Come to God so that he'll give us what we really want. But we can't afford to waste the lesson this son is learning the hard way. We don't come to God to get his stuff. We come to God to get God! We don't just come to God as a resource with our hand out we come to a person with our arms open. Ps. 16:11 says in his presence is fullness of joy. At his righthand are pleasures forevermore. See it in this story it's taken this guy being broke, starving and alone to realize that the abundant life he left home to find, was offered to him in his father all along. Some of you need to come home—not come home to morality but come home to the God himself—a loving a mercifcul Father.

So he decides to return to the Father, and he comes up with a game plan for how he's going to approach this reunion and he starts writing his speech, he's going to say, 18 "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." Now notice that he's aware that in this society he can't just stroll up to the house and start things fresh. He knows he has to make restitution to his Father some sort of payment. He's going to have to earn his way back in to the graces of his Father. Just think about it: How nervous would you be? Will my Father hate me? Will he even speak to me? Can you imagine the guilt this guy feels? The shame of walking up to the guy you wished dead and took his stuff? Ther's a tension here –what's going to happen. What's happens when wicked, dirty, shameful sinners try and come home to their father?

And as he comes down the road his Father sees him. And in what is one of the most beautiful and loving pictures of mercy and grace in the Bible we read in vs. 20 "but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." In those days old men didn't run—children and youth and women ran—but not men—it meant pulling up your skirt and bearing your legs. But he's so overwhelmed with joy that he doesn't even care about the dignity of social protocol. He gets to him and in the Greek it says he fell on his neck and kissed him. Lit. covered him with kisses. And after he gives he speech his Father says, 22 "Bring quickly the best robe—the best robe was almost certainly his own personal robe expensive beautiful—and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet—the ring was a signet ring that carried the family crest it was a visible symbol that he was in the family. And then he steps things up another level vs 23 bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate—the fattened calf was extremely expensive and killing it was a huge deal. And then he declares, "for this my son was dead and is alive gain; he was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate." Steaks on the grill huge party—the prodigal son has come home.

When you've mocked God, disobeyed him, mistreated him, ran from him—this is the kind of welcome you receive when you repent and come home. You don't have to wonder what kind of welcome you'll receive. We don't repent and wonder if God will be kind to us. Rom. 2:4 says that God's kindness leads us to repentance which means if you're repenting, you're not repenting in hopes of receiving his kindness, you're repenting because he's already given it to you by his grace.

Notice here there's no: probation period. The Father didn't have to think about it. He doesn't try to keep some healthy emotional distance to keep himself from being hurt. He gives himself fully and immediately—doesn't ask him to clean himself up first. Doesn't tell him to go take a shower and wash off the pig slop he embraces him. And covers up his shame—best robe, family ring, fresh set of shoes, steaks on the grill—and he does it all freely. Did you notice that the Father completely ignored his speech. Doesn't even acknowledge it. Like the whole restitution plan where he says I'm not worthy to be a son, I'll work like a hired hand—the Father's not even going to entertain that. Why? Because there is nothing the son can do to work his way in to the family—nothing he can do to restore to his father what he took from him. Land's already someone else's. His father's social status is already downgraded. The only way this thing can work is by sheer grace.

The son's self-evaluation is correct. He did sin. Big time. He's absolutely not worthy to be a son—but here's the kicker: <u>being worthy isn't a criteria for being in the family.</u> It's not his promise today or his potential tomorrow—what makes this son a part of the family is the declaration of the Father. His feelings of shame and guilt, his unpresentable unworthy life—are redeemed by the words, "This son of mine" You see he probably didn't feel like a son. He certainly hadn't acted like one. But the good news this morning is that <u>my feelings before God don't determine my status before God.</u> My Father does. The only thing that matters is the Father's words "he's mine". And in the same way when we repent of our sin—the robe and ring are ready. The feast is waiting and the Father is overjoyed that one of his lost children has come home.

And so this is the end of the first act. And this is a very natural place to end a story but Jesus doesn't end it here, and this is very intentional because what he's about to say, in some ways, serves as a twist to correct a wrong idea that many could easily get from the story of the younger brother. Don't rebel and disobey. Be a good person and obey God's commands. That is not the message he's communicating here and he's about to show you that. Now up to this point, if you hadn't guessed already, Jesus has been speaking to the tax collectors and sinners through the story of the younger brother. And he's shown them that despite their sinfulness the mercy of God is available to them without payment or restitution—by sheer grace. This no doubt bothered the Pharisees who you can almost here cheering Jesus on as he talks about the sinners, but now Jesus turns the tables and is about to cut them deep with the truth about grace. He's about to show them that with all of their religion and rule keeping and morality they are just as far away from home. And so he starts talking about the older brother…

Vs. 25 says that the older brother heard music and dancing—like he heard dancing—they're getting after it having a great time and the brother asks one of the servants what going on? And in vs 27 the servant responds, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." Vs. 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. Now remember this is the guy who's kept all the rules. This is the guy who never left home. He obeyed. And when the sinful, wreckless, young brother of his comes home and his father extends free grace and mercy and fully accepts and embraces him—he is mad. He's not going in—which is not only just pouty but it's extremely disrespectful to his Father; huge slap in the face to not attend the feast.

But look at the Father vs 28 he came out and entreated him. This word entreated in the Greek means to urge or beg. This Isn't this the best Father? Like instead of sending a servant to say "you're being ridiculous" he personally leaves the party and shows compassion. And says I don't want to have this party without you. I want you with me. I want you to be a part of the feast. But the older son isn't having any of it. Vs 29, but 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. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for

him!' Notice he doesn't even recognize him as his brother he calls him "this son of yours" and he draws attention to his personal performance and excellence. These many years I've served you and I have never disobeyed your command…I've always done what you asked, and….and you never threw a party for me…and watch what the father says…31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Did you catch that, "Son you are always with me…all that is mine is yours." The reward of obedience is getting to be with the Father. But he doesn't care. And this is where we see that just like the morally bad son who left home didn't want the father, morally good son who stayed home didn't want the father either. And in a very real way is far from home.

And the parable ends with these words… 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" It's hard to express how shocking this finish would have been to the original hearers. Especially for the Pharisees who prided themselves on obedience and keeping the rules. You see at the end of the story the wicked evil son is saved, but the morally good obedient son is lost. Jesus is completely exploding these people's categories for thinking about salvation and the grace of God. You see for them, good obedient moral people go to heaven and bad disobedient people go to hell. Isn't this how we tend to think? Adolf Hitler and Osama Bin Laden go to hell, sweet grandmas who make pecan pie and spoil their grandchildren go to heaven. And Jesus is challenging that—he want you to re think this whole thing.

There are two different ways people try to be their own saviors—two ways that people try to fix the brokenness in their lives and move forward…And one way is to and find yourself by rejecting the rules and just living however you want and doing whatever you feel like. But there's another way and that's to try really hard to be morally good and obey and keep the rules. But Jesus is saying that both approaches are wrong. The younger brother breaks all the rules and older brother keeps all the rules and they're both lost! You can't address your deepest needs by being really bad or by being really good. You can't rescue your broken life by being immoral or by being moral. In fact, notice the younger brother repents and is saved. But the older brother doesn't repent and he's lost, but we need to ask the question of what? Repent of what? He kept the rules. He followed the moral code every step of the way. And the answer is, he needs to repent for the reasons he did all of his good things. He didn't do it because he loved his Father. He obeyed because he loved himself and his obedience was a way to secure honor and recognition. He was the "good" son we could all be proud of. He was the elder brother. He was receiving a double portion. He was the noble one. And every act of moral goodness was another step toward winning Jerusalem man of the year. He doesn't need to repent of all the bad works he did, he needs to repent of trying to build an identity on his good works.

And ironically, if you understand how families worked in this culture, you'd know that he wasn't even fulfilling his biggest moral obligation. I mentioned earlier that the elder brother would have received a double portion, and that was in part because he was entrusted with taking care of his parents and keeping the family together—it was his job to keep the family going. And it's important that we know this because before Jesus tells this parable he tells two other parables about something that was lost and how someone went to find it—a lost sheep and a lost coin. But then you get to this story and you have the lost son—those are the words of his Father—and no one goes to find him. And if you lived in this culture there wouldn't have been any question about whose job it was to go find the lost brother and bring him home—it was the elder brother. He was supposed to be the one to leave home and do whatever was necessary to bring back his brother even if it cost him dearly. But he didn't. The sinful rebellious son didn't have a good elder brother that went after him to bring him home. But friends you and I do. Jesus Christ is our elder brother, who left home, and came after us. And he did it at great cost to himself. You see on the cross he stripped naked so that we could be clothed. He was received our punishment so that we could receive his mercy. He was separated from God so that we could come home. He loves us. He wants to be with us.

And its only through the work of our elder brother that we can return to the Father and come into the feast. Heb. 2:11 says that he is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. Can you believe that? Haven't you ever felt that way about a sibling? Like Jesus, reigning in perfect glory in the presence of sinless angels and there's not experience one ounce of shame in him when he looks at us—sinful, broken—and says, "This is my brother. This is my sister!" Can you believe that. It's not like Harry Potter where he locks us in a room upstairs when he company because he's ashamed of us. He's not—and he stands before the universe and with joy in his heart says, "They're with me." This is our elder brother. This is our hope!

You'll notice that this story ends on a Cliff hanger…We never learn whether the older brother comes in or not. And what I think Jesus is doing here is pressing us for a response. We don't know how the story ends but we know that the Father has came out to both sons and invited them into the feast? Will we come into the feast?

Maybe you're a younger brother: sin, pleasure, it leads to famine—come home. You can't earn it, you can't clean yourself up first. Will you give up your efforts at trying to earn your way and come into the feast?

Maybe you're more of an older brother. You're religious. You're a good person. You keep the rules but the truth is you've build your identity on Christianity not Christ.

Maybe you see both brother in yourself—maybe you want God's stuff but not God. Maybe you've viewed him as genie to get what you want.