

### **A college story introduces the feeling of distance**

One night back in college, I was hanging out with some friends at one of their apartments. It was getting late, and I decided to head out. As I was leaving, I made a joke, and everyone started laughing. I was feeling good about myself, ending the evening on a high note, with everyone, including a couple of cute girls, laughing at my joke.

But then things took a turn for the worse. There was a coat closet by the front door, and as I'm leaving, basking in everyone's laughter, I attempt to exit through the closet door.

My joke had primed the pump of laughter, and all that laughing shifted from laughing with me to laughing at me. And I got very embarrassed as I closed the closet door and opened the front door for my exit of shame.

As I exited the apartment into the darkness of night, things also felt dark inside of me, that there was this distance now between myself and my friends, as I took their laughter way too personally.

### **Relevance: we could use help handling our feelings of distance**

It stinks to feel distant. And sadly, we could all share much worse stories of times feeling distant, alone, alienated, with a person, or a group, or perhaps even with God.

And when we feel the pain of distance, we often don't handle it all that well. That night, as I drove home, I beat myself up for my stupidity. And that negativity about myself and my snickering friends carried into the next few days, even though it was just a silly mistake that in the big scheme of things didn't matter at all.

### **Orienting to God's Word**

As we look to God's Word this morning, we'll see two groups from back in Jesus' day who also struggled with distance with each other and with God. In Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells stories to help these people. Stories that will help us with our distances as well. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the gospel of Luke, chapter 15.

In Luke 15, Jesus speaks to two groups who did not get along. On the one side are the Pharisees: religious leaders who meticulously followed God's law and wanted others to do the same, but lacked love for those who did not measure up to their standards.

On the other side are those described as the tax collectors and sinners. People not all that interested in following God's law or listening to the religious leaders. But now some of them are attracted to Jesus. And the Pharisees mutter about Jesus sharing table fellowship with these unrepentant sinners.

And Jesus responds to their muttering with three stories. In the first, there's a shepherd with 100 sheep, and one is lost. Rather than cut his losses, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one lost sheep. And when he finds it, he calls his friends and neighbors together saying, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."

In the second story a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. And she carefully searches her house, and upon finding her coin, calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." And Jesus then concludes both stories by saying that heaven rejoices when one who was lost is found.

### **Teaching: Creating and bridging distances**

*Younger brother distances and becomes homeless (15:11-20)* – Then Jesus shares a third story, perhaps His most famous story, starting in verse 11 of Luke chapter 15. **(11-12a)**

“<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’”

This younger son creates great distance by demanding his share of the father's estate, a very shameful act. It means that the son wants to start living as if his father is already dead. So this is a heartless rejection of his father and home. You know, it's always the younger one, which I say with no bias whatsoever as the older sibling in my family. 😊

The father no doubt aches as his younger son creates distance with his outrageous request. The father could respond angrily, putting the younger son in his place, rejecting his request and condemning him for this shameful act. Or the father could try to appease his son, say by offering him more of the income from the family land.

But those responses will probably not close the distance between father and son. They may even drive the son further away. So the father responds to his son's outrageous request

outrageously, in the hopes that it might eventually lead to closing their distance. But it will require the father to absorb public shame and to take the chance of giving the younger son the resources he needs to take his feelings of inner distance and create geographic distance as well.

The middle of verse 12 shares the father's outrageous response, saying: **(12b-13)**

So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”

To be clear, verses 11-13 are not the same as a modern-day small-town boy leaving home to explore city life. No, the father in the story represents our heavenly Father. So this younger son has completely distanced himself from God's home and its values. He distances as he implies that he wishes his father were already dead, and liquidates part of his land, and sets off for a distant country.

A place where the younger son's money and anonymity make it easy for him to indulge his sinful desires. Far from his father's house, where no one knows who he is, he squanders his untimely wealth in wild living.

Like the younger son, this is one way we can create distance from our heavenly Father, with obvious, ongoing sin. Like when we let our resentment build and build until our anger gets out of control, or as we continue to keep looking at porn or getting behind the wheel drunk over and over.

But other times, we travel far from our Father's house, in more subtle ways. Like when you or I seek to earn love by being the funny one in your group of college friends rather than resting in our heavenly Father's love. Unable to handle it when everyone laughs at my silly mistake, rather than being able to join in the laughter, because who cares, for I'm a beloved child of God.

Or like traveling far from the father's house as we believe that we'll only be important once we get that big promotion and show everyone that we're a success, rather than trusting that we're already important as God's beloved child.

In the case of the younger son in the story, his sinful path is then made worse by circumstances outside of his control in verse 14. **(14)**

<sup>14</sup>“After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.”

This place far from home becomes inhospitable to the younger son as there is a severe famine. In his desperation, far from the resources of home, he takes a desperate step in verse 15. **(15-16)**

<sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.”

Jews considered pigs an unclean, defiling animal, so only a desperate Jew would take this job. There, feeding the unclean pigs, he experiences just how homeless he’s become. Even the pigs are treated as more valuable. At least they’re being fed. And now he longs to eat the slop of the dirty, unclean pigs.

This is not how he imagined things turning out as he fled his father’s house. But as the younger son used his freedom to live greedy like a pig, it may have started with a season of enjoyment, but now his persistent sin has brought him to rock bottom.

We may not be brought low financially speaking, like the younger son, but if we keep sinning in the distant country, far from our heavenly Father’s house, we’ll eventually be brought low. The problem with the distant country is that it’s not our true home, it’s just where we’re running, and it just can’t provide what our heavenly Father can. In verse 17, the younger son finally realizes this, coming to his senses as he remembers his father’s house, and then something of who he really is. **(17-20a)**

<sup>17</sup> “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.”

The younger son knows he’s blown it. Maybe it’d be safer to stay far from home, where at least he won’t risk the added pain of his family’s rejection. Perhaps, but the younger son is filthy and starving with nowhere else to go, and so having come to his senses, he now comes to his father.

*The father’s gracious welcome home (15:20-24)* – As he does, let’s see how the father responds to his return in the middle of verse 20. **(20b)**

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

I wonder how often the father gazes down the path, looking for his lost son on the horizon. Then one day, the father finally sees his needy, broken son trudging home. And what does verse 20 say the Father is filled with? It’s not burning anger, or a long lecture of “I told you so’s.” No, the father’s heart fills with compassion, as he sprints towards his son.

And the father then throws his arms around his broken boy and kisses him. The boy’s ugly brokenness surrounded by his father’s beautiful embrace. What other faith describes God like this?

A commentary I read notes that this image of running, throwing arms around, and kissing occurs just one other place in Scripture. It’s in Genesis chapter 33, in Jacob’s reconciliation with his older brother Esau. In that story, younger brother Jacob, like the younger brother here, offends both his father and older brother in an inheritance issue. Like the younger son, Jacob decides to come home, but instead of experiencing a reckoning, Jacob experiences Esau running, throwing his arms around him, and kissing him.

To quote that commentary, “So remarkable was Esau’s response that Jacob believed he had seen “the face of God” (Genesis 33:10). So it is with the younger son: both he and Jacob have been accosted by grace, and grace is the face of God.<sup>1</sup>

The son, having been embraced by grace, begins his rehearsed speech in verse 21. **(21)** “<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”

The son seeks to lower his status, knowing he’s unworthy. But the father is hearing none of it, cutting off his son before he can finish, making it clear that there is complete forgiveness, and that he is still a son in verse 22. **(22)**

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’”

In that culture, these pieces of clothing signify status and honor, that the father has fully restored him as his son, that the distance the son had created is completely bridged.

In all this the father is communicating to his needy child, “No, no, no, no, no, your failures don’t define you son. My love for you does. You are my beloved son.”

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel According to Luke* (Pillar New Testament Commentary) by James Edwards.

If you've come to Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead, then your failures no longer define you. Your heavenly Father's love for you does. Whether you just came to Jesus in faith for the first time in this moment, and let me know afterwards if that's you, or whether you've known Jesus for decades, you are Your heavenly Father's beloved son or daughter. That's who you are.

And so if you've left your heavenly Father's home, destructively searching for love, approval, identity in the wrong places, our heavenly Father would love to welcome you home this morning, embracing you with His touch of blessing.

Why wouldn't you repent of your sin and return to your heavenly Father? There's no "withholding period" with His love. No matter what you've been doing, He's been loving you, His son or daughter, the whole time, and He's ready to embrace you this morning. And in verse 23, the father can't wait to bless his son further, saying: **(23-24)**

“<sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

The previous two stories ended with a shepherd and a woman calling everyone together and saying, “Rejoice with me; I have found the lost one.”

Now that the younger brother is home, the father calls everyone together for a celebration feast. “Rejoice with me; I have found the lost one.” And in a culture where meat is a rare treat, the father commands the slaughter of the fattened calf.

This lavish celebration is not what the younger son had in mind. His plan was to play a role in bridging the distance by lowering himself to be like a hired servant. Perhaps the younger son now feels embarrassed about receiving so much that is so unmerited.

But thankfully, the younger son now knows what to do. He has learned that his father's house is not a place where one tries to earn love, and so the son just surrenders to his father's over the top, lavish love. He lets his father joyfully throw him a party, by grace. And we are to do the same when we come home from a sinful time in the distant country. To receive by grace our heavenly Father's love that we don't deserve, and join in the celebration at His feast.

*The older brother also distances (15:25-30)* – Now the Pharisees had not yet embraced all this, so when sinners come towards Jesus, rather than celebrating, they complain. So Jesus introduces a new character to speak to the Pharisees in verse 25. **(25-26)**

<sup>25</sup>“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Unlike the younger brother, the older brother has been living responsibly at home. But he’s also been distancing himself from his father.

Jesus subtly introduces this by initially placing the older brother “out in the field”, a bit away from home. And when the older brother sees the celebration at home, instead of joining in, he stays distant and summons a servant to ask what’s going on. In verse 27, the servant replies.

**(27-28a)**

<sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

With the younger brother’s return home, an angry, unforgiving side to the older brother surfaces. Rather than the music, feasting, and dancing drawing the older brother in, he distances, and he thinks he is completely justified in this.

Unlike his younger brother, he is not going to “come to himself” and head for home. So his father searches him out. When he finds his son, the father could put him in his place, condemning his shameful behavior. But that won’t close the distance. So as he did with his younger son, the father again focuses on increasing the chances for reconciliation in the middle of verse 28. It says: **(28b)**

So his father went out and pleaded with him.

The older brother, who is normally so good at obeying his father, has a really hard time with that, instead distancing himself even further in verse 29. **(29-30)**

<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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’”

The older son is resentful, distant, and unlike his younger brother, he never addresses his father as “father” in the story. Verse 29 makes clear that he has not enjoyed their relationship, describing himself as slaving for his father. And he wants more financial reward to come from that so that he can have a celebration with only his friends. Not with his father, and not with his younger brother, who he can’t even bring himself to call by his name or as “brother”.

Back in verse 24, the father exclaims about his younger son, “this son of mine!” Here in verse 30, the older brother says disgustingly, “this son of yours.”

He won’t say his brother’s name in verse 30, but he’s glad to name his brother’s sins. Earlier in the story, they were left at the broad description of “wild living”, but here the older brother makes sure to clarify that “this son of yours” squandered the family property on prostitutes.

One could easily see the older brother also suggesting that the younger son may have mixed motives in his return, that perhaps hunger played a larger role than repentance. Or one could see the older brother enjoying a conversation today about whether that person who messed up their first marriage so badly deserves to get married again, or whether that struggling person who just started coming to church is here for the “right” reasons.

As the older brother makes accusations about his little brother’s sins and about his father’s foolish forgiveness, he remains blind to his own sins. Listen to how author Henri Nouwen describes this danger for those with older brother tendencies, saying:

“There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding ‘sin.’ The lostness of the resentful ‘saint’ is so hard to reach precisely because it is so closely wedded to the desire to be good and virtuous. I know, from my own life, how diligently I have tried to be good, acceptable, likable, and a worthy example for others. There was always the conscious effort to avoid the pitfalls of sin and the constant fear of giving in to temptation. But with all of that there came a seriousness, a moralistic intensity - and even a touch of fanaticism - that made it increasingly difficult to feel at home in my Father’s house.”<sup>2</sup>

*The father’s gracious invitation (15:31-32)* – Fortunately for all of us, whether more younger brother, or older brother, or both, the father keeps pursuing relationship with all kinds of strugglers. We see this in his response to his bitter older son in verse 31. **(31)**

<sup>31</sup> “My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

The father does not respond to his older son’s anger with anger of his own, knowing that will only create more distance. Nor does he get into a debate about the merits of celebrating the return of a son who dishonored the family. The father knows that debate will never save his older son from his prideful self-righteousness.

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 72.



Rather, the father moves beyond these kinds of issues, attempting to bridge the distance by declaring his generous love for his embittered son, saying, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”

The father longs for reconciliation with both sons. In telling the story in this way, Jesus pleads for reconciliation with His judgmental critics the Pharisees, who are the older brother.

And so, as Pastor Tim Keller notes, Jesus is different from any conservatives who give in to the temptation to despise any labeled as “irresponsible, bad people.” And Jesus is different from any liberals who give in to the temptation to despise any labeled as the “judgmental people.”

Rather, His heart is for everyone, filled with compassion for those with younger or older brother struggles, graciously inviting both into relationship. And having shared his heart’s desire for their relationship, the father now insists on relationship between his sons in verse 32. **(32)**

<sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

The father is saying here, “Son, your younger brother is not ‘this son of mine’, he is ‘this brother of yours’ and we have to celebrate his return.”

There is currently a huge distance between the two brothers, and left to their own, it probably won’t be bridged. So the father invites his older son, who has become homeless while staying at home, to leave his judgmental pride and come inside to reconciled relationships.

To truly come into his father’s house, where those who struggle with wild living and those who struggle with self-righteous pride can both enjoy a love that isn’t earned, that is generously given by a gracious father. A home where any kind of struggler can rejoice that the father has poured out his grace on other kinds of strugglers too.

*Resolving this open-ended story* – Let’s see now how the older brother responds to his father’s gracious invitation... Actually we can’t, because Jesus ends the story here. Perhaps Jesus leaves it unresolved to give the older brother Pharisees listening a chance to respond themselves.

To realize that being in right standing before a perfect God can never be achieved by obedience, no matter how diligent. That righteousness before our heavenly Father can only be received as a gift, because of the Father’s great love. And so the Pharisees must put aside their pride, and humbly receive the gift of righteousness to join in the party’s celebration.

A celebration where one does not complain about Jesus eating with sinners, but instead rejoices, with all of heaven, when one who was lost is found. A celebration where the participants invite other older and younger brother sinners to join them at the party through faith in Jesus.

A commentary I read this week saw not only this open-ended invitation to the Pharisees, but also a later resolution in the story. Luke not only wrote this gospel, but also the book of Acts.

There in Acts, Paul, the ultimate older brother, realized that he could not earn righteousness before God by meticulously obeying the law. So Paul instead received, as a gift, righteousness from God through faith in Jesus. Paul joined in the heavenly Father's celebration, and then invited as many as he possibly could to join him there.<sup>3</sup>

We don't know if the older brother in the story repented of his pride and joined the father's gracious celebration, as Paul did. What we do know is that this unresolved ending invites us to finish the story in our lives this week.

## **Next Step**

As we leave this place, and take our next steps, remember that the point of the story is not to strive to fill your ache apart from God, and it's not to win the argument, and it's not to prove that you're better than those "judgmental people" or "irresponsible people."

If you're distant like the older son, or the younger, the point is to head home to your heavenly Father's open arms. That's our next step, head home.

Think of all three stories. Why would a shepherd risk his 99 remaining sheep to go after the lost one? That's bad business; just cut your losses and move on with your 99.

And why would a woman search meticulously for a lost coin, only then to gather her friends and neighbors to throw a celebration that may have cost more than the coin?

And why would a father immediately give inheritance to such an immature son and then later fully restore him, with no probationary period?

And why would a father respond to his bitter son's accusations by saying, "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

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<sup>3</sup> *The Gospel According to Luke* (Pillar New Testament Commentary) by James Edwards.

It's because these are not stories on living sensibly. These are stories of God's extravagant grace and love and of His over the top joy when the lost are found. So isn't it time to stop striving, or judging, or living in guilt, or searching in the wrong places, and just head home to His open arms and receive His touch of blessing?

Let's pray...