



Two sons

"There was a man who had two sons."

(Luke 15:11)

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Then the Lord Jesus said, *"There was a man who had two sons."* As the parable unfolds there is a surprising twist as the younger son is found but the older becomes lost. The Lord addresses the relationship between the Pharisees and teachers of the law and the sinners in Israel.

One day the younger son asks his father for his share of the estate. He takes it and leaves for a distant country. This young man didn't like the restrictions in his father's home and felt that life would be more interesting somewhere else. When he got there he used his wealth to buy anything he desired, indulging in sin and living irresponsibly. He quickly squandered everything in a wild and immoral life.

No doubt the tax collectors and "sinners" could identify with the younger brother. The tax collectors were despised for defrauding the people. The "sinners" were prostitutes and adulterers who lived sexually immoral lives; they were thieves and murderers. "Sinners" ignored God's law and followed the evil desires of their heart.

Among God's people, many covenant children have acted like the younger son. Families grieve because of children who've left home and forsaken the family of God. Many "younger brothers" (and sisters) have left to pursue selfish interests. Some left to enjoy a relationship outside of God's family. Others left when they became ensnared in alcohol, drugs, or sex. Others just don't want to make a commitment to Christ and his family, and desire to go their own way. They leave because there's no place in God's family for those who insist on living as the world does. They are lost, for they live without hope, as the younger brother did in a distant land.

But the Lord also speaks about the other son. When the father took back the younger son, his older brother became angry. How could his father receive one who'd squandered his inheritance in wild living?

He says to his father, *"You're not treating me fairly. I've always obeyed you. I was the good son who fulfilled all my responsibilities. When my brother comes back, you kill the fattened calf, but you never even gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends."*

His attitude is, "I've earned certain rights and I'm entitled to the family inheritance because I've worked so hard for it." He reveals what really lives in his heart. The reason he slaved for his father all these years isn't because he loved him, but because he expected that he'd receive the inheritance when his father was gone. His brother's return threatens his inheritance, so he becomes angry.

The Lord tells this parable because of the attitude of the Pharisees. They're like the older brother, thinking they've earned something. Their attitude is, "Those 'sinners' have forfeited their spiritual inheritance, but we've earned God's favour. We live good moral lives, and we're faithful members of the church." Yet both "brothers" actually stand condemned. The tax collectors and "sinners" deserve to be rejected by the heavenly Father for squandering their inheritance by their wicked life. But the Pharisees shouldn't think they're superior, for Jesus exposes what lives in their hearts. They didn't serve the Father out of love, but for selfish gain. Therefore they too, aren't worthy of the Father's inheritance.

Today, when covenant children rebel and leave the church to pursue their own desires, they place themselves outside of God's family. But Jesus warns us not to have the morally superior attitude of the older brother. How easy it is to feel that since we obey the Lord and lead a good life, we deserve our inheritance in God's kingdom. But if we have that self-righteous attitude in which we feel that God owes us something, we're just as lost as the younger brother. With a humble heart we confess, *"Father, I deserve nothing from you, but because of your love for me, I desire with my whole heart to serve you with my whole life."*

That humble attitude is also necessary when receiving our younger brothers and sisters who desire to return to the Father's family. We make it so difficult for the lost members to return when we take a morally superior attitude. But Jesus Christ is the true brother who reaches out to sinners in order to reveal the Father's love and mercy. Likewise, a true brother or sister reaches out to those who are lost so that they may be found.

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