

# Why are we here?

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, if we turn together back to the Gospel of Luke in chapter 15, what I would like to do is work through this passage.

As a whole, there's certain points I'd like to pull out. Hopefully we're not doing too much jumping around, but there are a few references in the passage. So if we have our Bibles in hand, that would be very handy. Well, there's lots of privileges for me being here today.

One of those privileges is people to say good morning because our church meets at 3.30 in the afternoon. And 3.30 in the afternoon is a fine time for church, except if you're preaching because then you're focused all day on this thing that is coming towards you.

It's very difficult to fixate on anything else. And usually when I preach, it's at 3.30 in the afternoon. In our passage today, we've got two brothers who are also fixated on something that's coming towards them, something that they're waiting for to arrive.

And it feels like both of them have a tough time fixating on anything else. They know that when their father passes away, they will receive his property, his wealth, and they are waiting for that to arrive.

[ 1 : 12 ] The parable is entitled in this version of the Bible, the parable of the lost son. I'm sure we're all familiar with this story. Even if we've never been to church before, we can understand the idea that somebody makes demands of an important authority figure, goes off, makes a mess of things, and comes back and is forgiven.

It's a popular trope in books and movies, and in our lives we see it all the time, not just in this parable. But the parable is called different things in different versions of the Bible.

It's also called the parable of the prodigal son. It is called the parable of the prodigal son. It's called the parable of the good father. And it's also called the parable of the two brothers, because there are two brothers in this story, and each one is equally as important as the other.

The younger son, of course, makes demands of his father. But as we go through, and as we go through together, hopefully we'll find out that the elder son is just as demanding, but in a different way. The one brother goes off, the other brother stays.

Two very different approaches, but I think they're both doing those things. They're both there for the same reason. They both want the stuff that they can get from their good father.

[ 2 : 32 ] So today, what I would like to do is think about this parable from the perspective of the two brothers in order to demonstrate to us why we need the intervention of the brother who doesn't appear in this story.

The brother who's telling this story. The brother that Tim Keller calls our true elder brother, who's, of course, Jesus. So first of all, we'll think about the younger brother.

We'll call him the rebel. Then we'll think about the elder brother. We'll call him the religious. And finally, we'll think about the brother who doesn't appear. Our true elder brother, the true elder brother of all Christians.

And we'll call him the rescuer. So the rebel, the religious, and then the rescuer. So let's think about the rebel first. The first thing we notice about the rebel brother is that he's impetuous.

He cannot wait to get his hands on what he thinks he's due. And he's covetous. So we know that covetousness is sinful. It's one of the Ten Commandments. And, of course, in chapter 12 of Luke, just a couple of chapters back, Jesus has already warned us about being covetous.

[ 3 : 39 ] In the parable of the rich fool, the one who has all his trust in his money, Jesus says to the crowds who are listening, Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.

Well, sadly, this young brother, it appears, believes that he does need worldly possessions. That is the thing that he needs above all else. So much so that he makes this demand of his father.

And this, of course, is a time not like today where fathers were respected figures, where there was clear hierarchy in place, and where the father was entitled to a certain level of respect from his son, would have expected to receive that respect from his son.

But his son shows him no respect at all. He doesn't even ask for his share of the property. He demands it. If you look at verse 12, he says, Father, give me my share of my estate. We just passed Christmas.

I wonder how many kids wrote letters or made requests to their parents and said, Give me a Nintendo Switch. Give me a new bike. And if they did ask in that way, I hope that none of them got it.

[ 4 : 45 ] Because when we make demands of our parents or of authority figures, we make requests and we use words like please. Because we respect them and because we have love for them.

I think the younger son shows that he doesn't even love his father. He's asking for his inheritance now. He's asking for what he will get when his father dies. He's essentially saying, I wish you were dead now so I can get your stuff.

I don't want you. I want your money. So we'd forgive the father for being irate, for kicking his son out of the family, saying, you're never going to get a penny out of me. But he doesn't.

This good father takes his property and he divides it between the two brothers. Shortly after he receives his money, we look at verse 13. The younger son, this rebel, takes off.

He goes to a distant country. He doesn't just want the good things he can get from his father. He doesn't just want his goods. He also doesn't want his father watching over him and seeing how he's going to spend it.

[ 5 : 45 ] He doesn't want his father around. He wants to put good distance between himself and his good father. At the start of verse 13, it says, Not long after that, the son got together all he had.

Those words, not long after that, kind of suggest to me that this was premeditated. It wasn't that he got this inheritance and thought, what am I going to do with it? He was thinking, I'm going to get my money and I'm going to take off and I want to be far away from my father so that I can do whatever I want.

And then he becomes prodigal. And I thought prodigal just meant kind of generally bad, wayward.

But it's got a particular meaning around being lavish or extravagant in a reckless or wasteful kind of way. And that's exactly what happens.

The Bible tells us in verse 13 again that he squandered his wealth in wild living. He wastes all the good things his kind father gave to him in sinful ways.

[ 6 : 50 ] Of course, famine arises. The young man's blown it. He's blown all his money. He's unprepared. He's living without the safety net of his father and he becomes destitute.

I think it's quite interesting that at this point, I know that we're talking in a parable, but even in the parable, that he doesn't say to himself, yeah, I'm in trouble. I'm going to go home. I'm going to go back to my good father.

He chooses himself to go into the employment of somebody who obviously doesn't care about him, has little respect for him. I think it feels like he tries to save himself.

He's trying to dig himself out of a hole. He's trying to sort out his own mess. Maybe he's too stubborn or too proud to go to his father. We often see this in life, I think.

Even as Christians, we can't think for a moment that we can sort out ourselves. We can polish ourselves up before coming to the God, the Father. Make ourselves clean enough, worthy enough, good enough, well-read enough to come to God.

[ 7 : 55 ] Because that's not how it works. Gift is a free gift. And God saves us from our sin. He doesn't wait for us to sort our sins out before we get entitled to come to him.

He's done that, of course, through the sacrifice of his son Jesus, who died on the cross, rose again, overcoming sin and death for us. Not anything that we have done ourselves.

So instead of returning to his father, the younger son humiliates himself even further. So he becomes a slave to a foreigner who puts him into a field to feed pigs, which we know is an unclean, filthy animal in the sight of Jewish people.

It couldn't really get much worse for this guy. But while he's become a slave to this foreigner now, our rebel's actually been a slave all his life. This isn't the first time he becomes a slave.

He was a slave to his jealousy. He wanted his father's money. He was a slave to the false freedom of living apart from his father. He thought freedom was what he was looking for.

[ 9 : 03 ] And then he was a slave to his money. The inheritance that he got, he lived for his money. He's been a slave all his life. We read that in verse 16, that he's so humiliated now that he doesn't even eat as well as the pigs.

So these filthy, unclean beasts are eating better than he has. All these decisions he's made, trying to control his own life, have only driven him to despair.

None of these decisions have benefited him in the long run. I was wondering if there were other servants working in these field of pigs with him and what they might have said to him if he was contemplating how bad things really were.

Or if we think about, if we've wandered far from God and we're at work on Monday morning and we feel despair and we're in trouble and we're not going back to God the Father and we ask our friends or colleagues instead for advice, what might they say?

Well, I think they might say something like, just don't think about it. Put it out of your mind. Have you seen what's on Netflix? Let's go have a drink. Distract yourself from the truth. Forget your father.

[ 10 : 10 ] Or they might say, you just need to work a little bit harder. You know, like a couple of months time, you could be the guy driving the truck to take the guys to the pig fields. You can do this.

Back up your ideas. Work harder. We can do it. Or they might say, just look inside yourself. That's where true freedom lies. You need to work out the thing that's deep inside you.

And once you find that, that's when you'll find happiness. Or they might try and convince you that this is exactly where you should be. This is real freedom, they'll say. No father watching over you, telling you what to do.

They certainly wouldn't say, I don't think, return to your loving father, confess your sins, and he will forgive you. But this is the only answer we have.

All the self-righteous, self-reflection, hard work, positive thinking is completely worthless if we are living estranged from our heavenly father.

[ 11 : 13 ] Finally, for our young, rebellious son, the turning point in his life is verse 17, I think, when he comes to his senses. He woke up to the truth.

He realized what was going on. He remembered the goodness of his father. And when he came to his senses, he doesn't hang about. He doesn't try to clean himself up.

He doesn't try to find a pair of shoes even. Verse 20 tells us, so he got up and went to his father. He simply got up and headed for home.

And he's got a whole speech rehearsed to tell his father about how wrong he's been, begging for a lowly position in his household. He realizes his actions have ruined his chances of being accepted as a son.

That's a given. Of course not. But maybe I could be a servant in your house. You've got bread. I wonder which of the sins of this young rebel we can relate to ourselves.

[ 12 : 13 ] jealousy, greed, trying to run and hide from God, trying to control our own lives instead of acquiescing with the will of our father, trying to clean ourselves up before we come to him, trying to sort out our own mess, being too proud to confess our sins, to repent.

Well, if you're a believer, the answer is probably all of them, to some degree. We're born in sin. We're shaped in iniquity. Our default position is a rebel against God.

Thankfully, because of the work of Jesus, we don't get what we deserve. I remember watching a movie one time. This is a terrible illustration because I can't remember the name of the movie and I can't remember anyone who was in it.

But there's this snapshot of a scene that's always stuck in my head. There's a young boy, 12, and he goes off from the, it's a kind of country and western style film.

He goes off from the homestead. He gets in trouble. His father, the hero, gets on his horse, rides out, saves him. I think he started a fire or something. They're walking back.

[ 13 : 29 ] The sun's coming down over a beautiful grassland. They're walking back slowly and the father has saved his son. He's forgiven his son. And he says to his son, I'm not going to do the accent.

He says, you know I'm going to have to whoop you a little bit. And the son says, I know, pop. And at the time, I was probably a late teen, I thought, this is the pinnacle of parenthood.

This is the perfect example of being a father because he saved his son. He forgave his son, but he can't let his sin, his fault go unpunished. He is going to beat him when he gets back to make sure that he doesn't forget not to do it again.

But we see none of this here. Not this good father. This is so counter-cultural for us. His father instead says, put a ring on his finger.

Probably a signet ring that indicated that he belongs to the family. He says, give him the best robe we've got. Probably the father's own robe. Put shoes on his feet.

[ 14 : 33 ] Make a feast we're celebrating. The exact opposite of what I think in our minds we expect a father to do. The son had said to himself, well, my father's house has got bread.

Maybe I can have a crust of bread instead of begging for the pods that the pigs are eating. But he doesn't receive bread. He receives the choicest steak, the very finest cut from the very finest beast that they have available.

The very best there is to enjoy. But it's not just what he eats. It's much more than that. Full restoration into the family. So it is for us when we turn from our sin.

When we repent to our heavenly father, there is this song that says, no guilt in life, no fear in death, because we're covered by the saving work of Jesus.

By his sacrifice, we're made right before God when we trust in him. He's taken our guilt, our sin, and he's paid the price that we owe. So that's our rebel.

[ 15 : 42 ] And for a long time, I thought that was the extent of the parable. I grew up as a young boy in church and I kind of get to that point and go, yep, a bad son and a good son. But actually, that's not what the parable is about.

Because if we go to the beginning of the passage that we read together in verse 11, the stories introduced there was a man who had two sons. So we know that the two sons are important. And then if we go to the beginning of Luke in chapter 15, verse 1, now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable. So Jesus is with sinners as he tended to be and he's delivering this parable in a series of three parables in response to the attitude of the Pharisees, the ones who thought that they could earn their way into heaven or earn God's favour by their good keeping of the law.

The first of the three parables is about a lost sheep. So a man has a hundred sheep and he leaves the ninety-nine to go and find the one. Then there's a story about a lost coin.

A woman has ten coins and she loses one and she sweeps the house until she finds it. And then he tells a parable of the two sons. So personally, I can imagine the Pharisees kind of nodding along a little bit with these parables.

[ 17 : 08 ] The sheep, yeah, our God's a good God. He knows each of us. Everyone who's saved, he will save us all. The coin, yes, God will lose nobody who comes to him.

Even when we talk about the younger son, I can imagine the Pharisees nodding along going, yeah, come home to our God. Our God is a forgiving God. Confess your sins. But when Jesus gets to the elder son, the one who stuck around, worked hard to keep the rules, and he reveals that keeping the laws, getting your head down, knuckling through, so that your father is indebted to you or owes you something, he'll reward your good behavior.

Then I can imagine the anger, the conviction maybe that they felt. The Pharisees are the older brother. When we meet our older brother, he's in the field, he's heard music and dancing, and he's come to see what's going on, and he's so angry that he refuses to go into the house where the celebration is taking place for his younger brother.

There's quite a few things going on here. So maybe as the elder son, he would have received a larger portion than the younger son, so a double portion. So it kind of would have been split, I think, three ways.

He would have got two thirds of the percentage, and the younger son would have got one. So maybe the elder son's annoyed that we're having this feast, and it's coming out of his share.

[ 18 : 43 ] Maybe he's showing that he's just as obsessed with money as his brother was. Secondly, he's upset that his father hasn't rewarded his performance, so his younger brother's gone off, blown everything, but he's been hanging around the whole time.

The words that he uses are really interesting. In verse 29, the elder son says, look, all these years I've been slaving for you. I never disobeyed your orders, yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

You didn't even give me a goat, let alone a prized half. The elder son's a Pharisee. He believes that his hard work and his effort in obeying his father's commands is what's earned him privilege.

Again, the father doesn't chastise him. He says, you're always with me in verse 31 here. You're always with me and everything I have is yours.

The father's words reveal to us that this elder son doesn't love his father either, just like his younger brother. He doesn't value the fact that while his younger brother has been away destitute, the elder son has been in the presence of his father this whole time.

[ 19 : 56 ] He's been with his good father all this time and all he's worried about is getting hold of a goat to have a party. Finally, for the elder son, he clearly doesn't love his brother either.

You look at the language he uses to describe his brother in verse 30. He says, this son of yours disassociating himself from his brother and he says, squandered your property with prostitutes, painting his brother in the worst possible light.

Not only that, but while his brother was in a land with famine, starving, feeding pigs, his brother, we know he had the means to help him and he didn't. In 1 John 2, verse 9, it says, anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in darkness.

This brother claims to be in the light. He thinks he's in the light. He's stayed with his father. He's kept the rules. But he's still walking in darkness because he hates his brother. He's been keeping up appearances with jealousy, pride, maybe even hate in his heart.

The Pharisees couldn't understand why Jesus was hanging around with publicans and sinners when he could have been debating theology with them. It's such a low opinion of the people that Jesus was with that they just couldn't understand it.

[ 21 : 20 ] But in the Old Testament, the Lord tells us that he does not look, the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart.

So this elder son had been outwardly doing what he wanted, what he thought he should be doing. But inwardly, his heart was darkened. He reveals himself to be self-righteous and self-serving.

I think it's interesting too that when the pretense kind of falls apart, it's in the face of the lavish forgiveness of his father. When his father pours forgiveness on his younger son, it's when the elder son's pretense all comes down.

Today we're really accustomed to thinking about things on a spectrum. So we talk about things like creativity or neurodiversity on a spectrum. Maybe we're all on it, we're just at one end or the other.

I wonder where we sit or where we think we sit on the rebellious to religious spectrum. maybe you feel like you're more prone to one than the other.

[ 22 : 34 ] I think it's more like a pendulum. So I think as Christians we're living on this pendulum where we fall into sin and we come back to God and then we think we're doing really well and we become proud and then we come back to God and we realise our mistake.

I remember once a Christian said to me that he had a flood in his house and he said so he went away there was a flood he came home and he says I can't understand it I was at church as if his performance would save him from anything bad happening in his life.

We're constantly trying to control our lives. We're trying to get what we can from the good that God has created in the world and we're living the way that we want to live or we're trying to control our lives by being so good before God that he has to reward us.

He has to repay us. But when we surrender control to God when we give up the fact that we can't control it we realise we were never in control anyway.

We surrender to God and then we're thankful that we weren't in control because what a mess we'd make of it. We're constantly swinging from swinging from reckless sin to self-righteous pride and maybe the work of sanctification in our hearts so making us more like Christ means that our swings get smaller but we're never perfectly still and that's why we are in need of the brother who does not appear in this story the brother who's the narrator of this story.

[ 24 : 27 ] Thirdly most importantly and but most concisely for today the one who left his home with his father didn't demand anything before he left left all glory and majesty in heaven where he'd known nothing but love since all eternity and he went willingly he didn't go into a far country to be separate from his father to escape his watchful eye he came into our world to do his father's will and while he was on earth he didn't squander anything not even a word or a thought everything he did he did to please his father unlike the elder son he never took praise for himself and everything he did Jesus pointed to God the father in heaven in the gospels when Jesus was asked called good he said why do you call me good no one's good except God alone constantly giving his father the glory this third brother came for us so unlike the elder brother in our parable who had the means to help his younger brother and didn't

Jesus came for us he left his glory for us he didn't just dip into his inheritance or spend some of his money to clothe us he gave the ultimate sacrifice he gave himself a ransom for our sin agonising death on the cross for us the greatest ever act of love and the seriousness of this can't be lost on us at the end of our parable today actually twice the father says our son the younger son wasn't just away he wasn't just in a far country he was dead the hard truth is that that is the state for all of us who are without Christ and it would have been the state for everyone for all humanity for all time if our rescuer Jesus had not come finally the prodigal son returned home that Jesus like the prodigal son returned home the son went home starving and with bare feet because of what he'd lost but Jesus went home with pierced with his feet pierced through with nails because of what he'd won on the cross

Jesus defeated sin and death so that we can also go home to our true home with our heavenly father and Jesus went home and he didn't stop he's constantly making intercession and sitting at the father's right hand pleading for our forgiveness because of the work he has done not because anything we deserve so in conclusion then we thought about why these two sons were where they were the elder son the younger son wanted to be rebellious and be away from his father the elder son wanted to be at home with his father but with ulterior motives so I wonder for us why we're here today we're not running away from God like the rebellious son obviously there are other places we could be maybe we're coming home maybe we've come to our senses we're returning to our heavenly father with a repentant heart and a willingness to submit ourselves to his goodness and if we are then we'll be accepted rings shoes feasts await if this is you don't delay in coming to your heavenly father today or maybe we're here because we think we're earning brownie points we think that it's cold wet it's not wet it's cold early January morning we could be in bed with tea and toast but maybe we think we're earning points by coming to church this morning maybe we'll add to our tally in the Lamb's

Book of Life maybe we'll get a mark beside our name but I'm sure we're not and I hope we're not because we cannot perform our way into heaven that's the way the Pharisees thought Jesus kept his harshest rebukes for these people and even if we did want to we would fail we slip we fall we backslide all the time we definitely come up short we have to be here this morning because of Jesus the one that Tim Keller calls the true elder brother the rescuer remember an act when Paul and Silas were freed from prison and the jailer asked them what must I do to be saved they didn't say to him here's a list of rules here's a copy of the Ten Commandments they said believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved you and your household will be saved and it doesn't matter what kind of unbeliever we were whether we're wild or reckless or puffed up and self-righteous or anything in between

God's able to save to the uttermost all who come to him we're not here because we're trying to earn anything we're here because we delight in the one who's already earned it all the one who's paid the price for our sins taken the punishment that we deserve and we love him we're not merely grateful to him this is not just saying thank you that would be to completely undermine the work that he has done on the cross we love him we live for him in Psalm 40 it says I desire to do your will my God your law is within my heart this is our pleasure the highlight of our week the place our souls are restored along life's journey until he returns or we go to be with him for all eternity Amen