

The request hit him like a ton of bricks. "I'm not dead yet son." Inheritance usually was handed out after the person was dead. This son couldn't wait. The first sign that this father would be different was that he actually divided it. He gave his son what he was asking for even though he knew it probably wouldn't be good for him. Then his heart broke even more as he watched that son leave. One son straying and one son staying.

This parable has many names. Parable of the lost son, parable of the prodigal son, parable of two sons. In many ways the parable does focus on the lost son, the son that left the family and squandered everything. We've been there. Turned away from family, walked away from God and squandered everything we had. But there's another son, an older son dutifully staying home with dad. He's got his inheritance now, but he still works. He has everything but his time in the fields does not slow down. We've been there too. Diligently working to try and keep what we have, thinking that we actually are owed everything we received for nothing.

This parable is Jesus in his finest 'story telling' mode. The lessons are clear. We know the details intimately. We love the return of the lost son, the prodigal. We wonder about the older son, just as lost. We listen to Jesus tell it to us once again in the gospel for this morning. This time our focus drifts to the real main character. This is...

**The Parable of the Father's love**  
**Love which wins the straying**  
**Love which wins the staying**

A number of years ago I was playing a softball game out in right field when a foul ball started coming my direction. I knew it would stray well out of play so I stood and watched it; watched it slam right into the windshield of a car. Then I realized it was my car. This stray foul ball did some horrible damage. Straying often does lead to things going horribly wrong. The younger son was far from home with no money and no job. His father wasn't there to help him out of his mess. He was straying, and that's when things really went wrong. **"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need."** Seems the younger son had strayed a bit too far from his father's love.

I know kids can't wait to get away from mom and dad. Their curfew is too early, they say no to candy and chips for supper, and they always are barking about cleaning your room. Mine did too. All kids can see is the pleasures of this world. So kids stray blowing off classes because they don't like discipline, giving half an effort because they don't like work, and partying because they like having fun. Adults face similar temptations to stray. Life would be fun without the responsibility; if we could only pursue our own goals for a while. We want all the pleasure that money can buy without parents, bosses, or God having a say.

As the younger son walked back a broken shell of his former self, he made out a strange image on the horizon. It couldn't be his father running. **"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."** The father's love didn't quit. He never stopped watching, hopeful his son would return and he wanted to be ready to pour out his love. Hugs and kisses given without questions, without conditions, without hearing the confession. This is the love the son remembered. It prompted his walk home. Hungry and broke, the younger son remembered how his father always provided for him, his brother, and the servants too. He remembered seeing his father's love in action hundreds of times before. Now he felt his father's love with a ring shoved on his finger and robe and sandals thrown on him. He was home. And he hadn't even started his speech.

We might say Jesus took this story too far. Did the younger son really have to take the job with the pigs or beg to eat pig food? If it were us we would have turned around much earlier. But Jesus takes us further, makes the situation the worst it could be, to highlight the best the younger son's got. When your money is tight, food is scarce, jobs are hard to come by, and family is gone you've strayed too far. Your sins are serious because they bring the worst, eternal death.

Now you know why Jesus takes the story further. Because when you think you've strayed too far, remember the love of God the Father. You can't stray too far from God's love. He watches for you with a love that won't quit. Remember his loving promise to provide and the love that won't let you be alone. Remember the Father's love and see it hanging for you on the cross. God the Father is serious about sin, so serious he takes yours away. The Father's love is visible. He forgives sins through his son Jesus. This is a parable about a father's love, our Father's love which wins the straying.

Two sons of the father both lost. God wants us to see ourselves in the younger son. See that no matter what we do there's forgiveness in Christ. No matter where we've gone or what we've become, we're welcome home with the Father; and his love brings us back. That's wonderfully comforting. But the story of the other son is one who is just as lost. He's lost and he hasn't left home. We who are part of God's family need to hear and not miss the lesson. The Father's love is for him too, love which wins the staying.

Every moment the younger son was out living it up, the older son was making a living working in the fields. He was the good son. Probably thought it was good the younger son was gone. He could not understand why the father kept watch for him. He may have hoped if what was true, if the money was gone, that he never see his brother again. So when he heard the younger son returned he was shocked, and livid. The son who wasted every penny and returned to drain more received a party. The son who never left and slaved for his father didn't get a dime. This wasn't fair. Then the loving father walked patiently out to him.

Thankfully we're keyed into the temptations of this world. We see the flashing lights and earthly pleasures for what they are, sinful. We would never complain against God because we know what can happen. We would never be like the prodigal son wasting life and resources. We would never, but others would. We stayed. We're here when others aren't. We're hearing the Word while others won't. We have Bibles and others don't. We work to support ourselves and others don't. They deserve what's coming to them and so do we. Sounds like the older son, **"All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me..."** he stayed home but still he was lost. And if your thoughts match his, if your self-righteousness, your desire to be rewarded or owed by God matches his then you're straying even though you're staying.

**"My son."** There's the father's love again to win the one who stayed. **"You are always with me, and everything I have is yours."** The Father owes you nothing and still you get everything. Still God calls you a son because of your brother Christ. Life under the covenant of his grace in Christ means you're constantly connected to him. You stay because the Father's love wins you back. You stay because this grace to undeserved people like us crushes sinful pride. You stay because the Father's love and compassion is visible to us in Jesus.

One lost brother dead but now alive. The other lost brother dead and we don't know. One father's love representing the love of our heavenly Father. A Father's love which says to us, "You're not earning your way into my family. I take you back because I love you in Jesus." God's forgiveness in Christ can restore your straying broken relationship with God like the younger son who strayed. God's love and desire to see you in heaven can restore your broken relationship even if you've never left and you've stayed in his house. You have been each of the two sons at some point in your life. But we never grow tired of hearing the story, the parable about the Father's love.