

# Two Sons

## Genuine Conversion & Obedient Service

In the gospels we find 2 parables about a father with two sons. The first, usually referred to as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” was told by Jesus to a mixed group of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus was criticized for being in the company of sinners. Through this parable, He shows that His actions were in harmony with the Father’s heart. The other parable is about a father with two sons and a vineyard. Jesus told this short story, while visiting the temple courts in Jerusalem, to a mixed group which included chief priests and the elders of the people. Through this parable Jesus made a strong point, namely, that while the religious were talking about obedience, the tax collectors and prostitutes were actually repenting and obeying. Although these parables were addressed to a Jewish audience, they illustrate very well the process of genuine conversion and the need for obedient service. Let’s take a closer look.

### 1. Two Sinners & Genuine Conversion

#### Luke 15:11-31: The Parable of the Prodigal Son

The term “prodigal” means wasteful. The traditional name for this parable was chosen because the younger son wasted his inheritance. But this parable has other important actors beside the younger son, and neither is wastefulness a central theme in the parable. Some better titles have been suggested such as “The Parable of the Loving Father” or “The Parable of the Lost Sons.” Clearly the father in this story loved both his sons, and each son had his own particular problem.

#### (a) The younger son: The worldly sinner

The younger of the two sons got tired of the routine at home. The thought of “being my own boss” without any externally imposed restrictions appealed to him. He claimed his rights and then set out to seek fulfillment, pleasure and personal realization. This is a sad but realistic picture of our human heart. By nature we are self-centered. We don’t like to be told what to do.

Seldom do pleasures live up to our expectations. Sometimes they do, at times they may even exceed our expectations, but only for a while. When the excitement cools off and the shine disappears, we again become aware of our thirst. Like the younger son, we run after another experience or buy another toy. Some by default, others by choice, embrace this shallow existence and live it till their dying day! Others awake, and not finding any worthwhile alternative, cut their life short. In this parable the younger son finally awakens in the middle of a serious crisis: he was bankrupt, lonely

and hungry. Again we see a realistic picture of our human heart. We often seem to need a desperate situation, a crisis, to awaken. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father." (v.17-20).

Has the Lord allowed some crisis in your life? Have you begun to feel your own emptiness, your own sinfulness? Conversion is more than repeating a "prayer of faith." Genuine conversion starts with a sense of desperation: genuine repentance. We are convinced that we are sinners and that we have offended the Holy and Almighty God! This leads us towards repentance. Like the younger son, we turn; we confess our guilt and throw ourselves into the Father's arms for mercy. And only then shall we experience what this young man discovered: that the Father is not angry with us, although He has all the right to be so. The father calls out "bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate" (v.23-24).

It is worth noting that the repentant son returned alone. He did not walk home with his prostitute friends neither did he arrive with some of the pigs. He did not seek to negotiate favorable terms or set personal preconditions for settling into the father's house. Genuine repentance leads to brokenness and humility. In time repentance will naturally show itself in a changed lifestyle.

### **(b) The older son: The religious sinner**

When Jesus told this parable, the older son represented the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This son was busy working in the father's field. Today this older brother could represent the religious, those who are busy trying to do things for God and satisfy their fellow believers. Of course it was positive that he was busy in the father's field. But like his younger brother, he also had a serious internal problem: his heart was not right. The older son worked for the wrong reason, he compared himself with others, and he had an over-optimistic perspective of how well he was doing: "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" (v. 29). Although this son lived near his father, he did not share the father's heart. His dream was to celebrate with like-minded "friends" and not with his father. When his father was happy and rejoicing, the older son was bitter, even angry. This is an emotive picture of Christianity without God's grace. Do you and I rejoice when our heavenly Father rejoices? Always?

Our religious heart is very deceitful. The fact that we are working hard in the Father's field, restricting our freedom and making serious sacrifices, sedates our conscience. We may begin to feel that the Father should now love us a little more than those who don't work so hard. We may even be a little critical of those Christians who seem more relaxed or work the field in a different way. As the years go by, something subtle happens: having been around the field for a long time, we begin to think we know how things should be run. For the benefit of the Father and the field, we make a few little "rules" and enforce them on those around us. We make the Father look stricter

than what He really is, and soon we find ourselves not rejoicing when the Father rejoices! The older son refused to enter the house and celebrate with his brother and with his father. Why? The older son wanted justice, not grace. The younger son should first be punished and then admitted. He should not be trusted until he showed tangible fruits of repentance. To enter the father's house and join the celebration would send the wrong message to his younger brother. He would associate himself with what he judged to be unrighteous. Even the father's pleading did not change his mind. Those who have felt no real need for God's grace, easily interpret the father's actions wrongly. It looks too cheap, too easy. When we disagree with the way God works, it becomes difficult to share in His joy when someone repents, asks for forgiveness, comes back or expresses his desire to be received.

I have come to learn that our heavenly Father showers His generous blessings on many persons, projects, situations... even on those He does not fully agree with! If He waited for perfection before blessing, He could never bless any of us! Our Father sees and hears true repentance. He knows when our heart is right. Our Father's grace is such that He not only blesses, but also feels compelled to celebrate even while knowing that there is still plenty of room for improvement! "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" (v. 32). This is no call for complacency. We want to be Bible based, holy and obedience Christians. But don't let what is still missing stop you from celebrating what the Lord is doing. Join your Father and learn to rejoice, even when you can see shortcomings and potential difficulties.

## **2. Two Believers & Obedient Service**

### **Matthew 21:28-32: The Parable of the Two Sons**

Salvation is a gift. When we repent and give our lives to the Lord, we are forgiven and immediately turned into children of God. We cannot contribute towards this salvation with our works; we simply and humbly believe and receive. But then, after our conversion, there is work to be done! "There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard'" (v.28). This call was based on a relationship: a father asking a son. It was an order and not a suggestion. It involved work and it had a degree of urgency: today. The lessons of this parable are very applicable to every Christian today.

#### **(a) The first son: The working Christian**

How did the first son respond to the father's call? "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went" (v.29). What possible reasons could this son have says "no"? Why do we sometimes refuse to engage in the Lord's work?

- **Authority:** He didn't like anyone telling him what to do. He had his own ideas.
- **Task:** He didn't like to work in vineyards. He would prefer a more respectable job.
- **Relationship:** Perhaps he didn't get on well with his father, and without fellowship there is no desire to obey.
- **Agenda:** He was too busy to work on his father's vineyard. Perhaps another day.
- **Fellow workers:** He didn't like the other people who worked in the vineyard.

- Maybe they didn't follow his ideas. Perhaps some had criticized him.
- **Doubts:** If this son had an intellectual and philosophical inclination, he could have doubted if this was really his father speaking. Could his words have a hidden second meaning? To play it safe, he thought it best to say no!

Whatever his reason, he said "no" and walked away. He may have walked passed his father's vineyard and seen the great need for work. Or maybe the disappointment he saw in his father's eyes made him reconsider. We are told that "later", allowing time for reflection, he changed his mind and went. Have you been resisting a call to work on some aspect of His vineyard? Is your Father calling you to help in a summer camp, to distribute some literature or to visit that new neighbour? Christian service involves obedience, a denying of our own tastes, ideas and opinions. When we hear our Father saying "Son, go...", we simply "go". When He says "work... in the vineyard" we humbly say "Yes, Lord". And when He says "today," we stop promising and dreaming about the future, we act!

### **(b) The second son: The talking Christian**

That father approached the second son with the same request. His initial response must have been a joy to the father's ears. "He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go" (v.30). Can you visualize the father's slowly fading smile, turning to disappointment, as the day went by?

The behaviour of this second son speaks of those spontaneous impulsive Christians, or perhaps to be more realistic, it speaks of you and me in those moments when we rapidly say "yes" to a call of service but never seem to get round to doing it. Perhaps you recall those happy and emotionally charged moments when you sung a sincere promise to obey and follow Him wherever, at whatever price, until the end of your life! Why did the second son say "yes" but didn't turn up? Consider some possibilities:

- **Sincerity:** He said yes to keep his father happy, but didn't really mean it.
- **Image:** There were other people listening, so he said yes so that they would think he was a good, obedient and cooperative son.
- **Sacrifice:** He initially thought it was going to be an easy job in the vineyard, but when he heard that the task was hard, he changed his mind.
- **Social:** He later heard that his other brother was not going to the vineyard. Without him, the work would not be much fun. So he decided not to go.
- **Justice:** It would not be fair for him to work without his brother.

Do you sometimes identify with one of these reasons? It is worth noting that unlike the first son, we are not told that the second son "regretted," "repented," or "changed his mind" (v.29). We are only told that "he did not go" (v.30). If this omission is significant, then some reasons for not going to the vineyard could be:

- **Priorities:** He was a busy man. He tried to do a number of other good jobs on the way to the vineyard and then run out of time or energy.
- **Timing:** Perhaps he waited for the threat of rain to pass! The "ideal moment" never arrived. But he is still seriously considering the possibility of helping later!
- **Forgetfulness:** He got distracted and forgot about his father and the vineyard.

- **Consistency:** Like most of us, he honestly struggled to do what he said he was going to do. It is always easier to talk than to work.

Perhaps these are the more common reasons which keep us back from obeying our Father's call to work in His vineyard. Turning to the chief priests and the elders of the people, Jesus asked them: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?' 'The first,' they answered. Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you'" (v.31). At the judgment seat of Christ each of us will "receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:10). If you are still alive, there is still work for you to do in His vineyard. What could you do "today"?

## Conclusion

These two parables are about two sons with similar opportunities reacting in different ways. One, with a humble heart, enjoys his father's forgiveness and goodness. The other, with a self-righteous heart, protests against the father's expressions of grace. One, after some reflection, ends up working in his father's vineyard. The other is still waiting for the right moment to go! Do you identify with any of these 4 sons? Remember that our heavenly Father still has more grace to shower on those who come to Him in need. Do not forget if you are a child of God, His call is also for you: "Son, go and work today in the vineyard."

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February 2008

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