

Luke 15:11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

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My Father's Eyes

Luke 15:11-32

There are two huge questions prompted by this ingenious parable, and both questions go unanswered by Jesus. The first question is: how does the younger son react to this unexpected welcome his father gives him? The second unanswered question is: does the older son ever come into the house to join the party?

Let's put ourselves in the sandals of each son for a minute. Imagine first that you are the younger son and you've just come to your senses. Destitution can do that. You suddenly realize that you have been the worst of sons. You've told your father you'd rather have his money than him, you've shamed him and broken his heart. In the process, you've ruined your own life, too. You're sitting there in the mud with pigs who are eating better than you are. The only thing that makes any sense is to admit to him what a fool you've been, ask him to hire you as a farm hand instead of a son so you can work your way back to some level of self-respect, and hope he doesn't kick you down the road and out of his life, which he has every right to do.

As you near the house, you are stunned to see him running toward you with his robes pulled up and his old bony knees churning like an Olympic runner. He throws his arms around you, kisses you on both cheeks, and, before you can finish the speech you've been rehearsing, he's serving barbecue to the entire village to celebrate your homecoming. More than homecoming. Resurrection. He keeps saying to the neighbors, who are almost as stunned as you are, "My son was dead and is alive again." Then he hugs your neck again and says, "My son was lost and is found!"

First question: how do you wrap your mind around this? You forfeited your right to be called his son; you don't even deserve to be hired as a farm hand; but, he throws a robe around your shoulders and a party around your sinfulness, and calls you "Son." How do you respond? Do you dare resume the honored role of your father's son after what you've done?

Seeing yourself for who you really are, can you find a way to see yourself as your father sees you?

Before you answer that, let's look at things through the older son's eyes. You've watched your father crumble after your brother cut his heart out and walked away with it. You picked up the pieces and kept things going when Dad lost his desire to live. You never claimed to be the perfect son, but compared to you-know-who, you are a saint. It hasn't been easy, seeing your father fall apart and shouldering the extra responsibility, all because little brother wanted to spend the rest of his life as though it were a weekend in Las Vegas. But you did it, because that's what good sons do.

And now you come back to find the father who did nothing but mope around while you kept things going throw a party for the kid who tore his life apart!

I'm sorry, but, how is this fair?

You patiently picked up the pieces, and Dad never even noticed.

You worked extra hours and never even got a goat for a get-together with friends.

You slaved to keep things going with never so much as a thank you, and you come home from a long day in the fields to find the entire town singing and dancing and feasting because that son of his decided to bless us all with his presence.

Again, how is this fair? Nobody in this crazy scenario is getting what he deserves, least of all, you! Well, one thing is certain, you may not be able to stop the party, but you sure don't have to join it. It's a meager protest, but it's something.

And then Dad comes out the door. Oh, geez. What is he doing that for? Just stay in there with the guests, Dad. We'll settle this later. But, he doesn't stay inside. He walks up, puts his arm around your shoulder and says, "Why aren't you coming in the house, Son?"

You explode; tell him exactly what you think of him... and his party...and his no-good younger son. Instead of exploding back at you for talking to him like that, he just says, "Don't you see, Son? Your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and has been found. We had to celebrate."

What do you do? Do you stay out there, resentful of your father's outrageously unfair grace toward your brother?

Do you begrudgingly go in the house, not because you want to; or because you're happy your brother is home; or because you think he deserves this kind of reception, but because that's what a good son

does?

Or, do your father's words reach down deep in your heart and change the way you see things? Can you truly welcome your brother home; offer him the same outrageous grace your father has offered him, joyfully celebrating him home? Will your father's grace transform your eyesight, so that you begin to see your own attitude of superiority, as well as a more gracious vision of your brother? Will you allow yourself to see through your father's eyes?

Jesus tells this parable because he knows that grace is the hardest thing for us to accept, for ourselves or for others. We are fairness freaks. People should get what they deserve, pay their debts, earn their wages, be treated as they treat others. That's fair. But if Jesus teaches us anything during his time on earth, it is that neither he nor his heavenly father is into fairness. Neither he nor the God he reveals ever set out to be fair; they set out to be gracious. And Grace isn't fair. By definition. As Rob Bell puts it, "*The father sees the younger brother's return as one more occasion to practice unfairness. The younger son doesn't deserve a party – that's the point of the party. That's how things work in the father's world. Profound unfairness."¹*

Bell even suggests something that is kind of radical, but worth considering. He says that we often think of heaven and hell as being locations – heaven is up there and hell is down there, but perhaps we should consider the possibility that heaven and hell are more about through whose eyes we see things. Jesus puts the older brother right there at the party, but not seeing things through his father's eyes causes him to refuse to join in the celebration. Heaven is right there in front of him – reconciliation, restoration, celebration; but the brother refuses to participate because he refuses to see his brother through his father's eyes.

And hell might also be the younger brother being at the party, but refusing to join in the dancing and singing and fun because he knows he doesn't deserve it; he knows it isn't fair; he knows what a terrible person he is, and he, too, refuses to see himself through his father's eyes. Maybe he's standing in the corner, unable to allow himself to receive this gift, because he knows he doesn't deserve it. Heaven may be in the same room, but he may be outside it because he can't see himself as his father sees him.

When I read this story, I see myself in both sons. As I get a little past mid-life, I can see more clearly the ways I've failed to be the son I should have been, or the brother I should have been, the husband, the father, the neighbor, the friend, or the pastor I should have been. And when I picture the father running toward me, tossing self-respect and dignity to the wind in order to throw his grace around me, well, as the hymn says, I scarce can take it in. I realize that I, too, have squandered so many chances to be the better man, the better Christian, and I don't deserve to be called His son. The question is whether I will continue to see myself through my own eyes that are clouded with the concept of fairness, or whether I will see myself through my father's eyes, the clear eyes of grace.

I also know that I am the older brother. There are many people I've failed to forgive; many people I've been happy to see get what they deserve. There are many people I avoid because, deep down inside, I don't want to have anything to do with them. There are people I resent, and parties I've missed because I thought I deserved a party more than they did. The question is whether I will continue to see those folks through my own eyes, darkened and distorted by superiority and prejudice, or whether I will see those folks through my father's eyes, and rejoice that one who had been dead is alive; one who was lost has been found.

It's funny. I could be either son and refuse to enjoy the party. It all depends on whether I see myself and the people around me through my get-what-you-deserve eyes, or through my father's grace-filled eyes.

So, how does this story end up for you?

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¹ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Harper Collins, Kindle Edition, 2011, p. 168.