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The Son Who Came Home

Luke 15:11–32 · Harvest · Adults

Luke sets this parable inside an argument. Sinners and tax collectors are gathering around Jesus, and some Pharisees and scribes object to the company he keeps (Lk 15:1–2). Jesus answers with three parables of something lost and found: a sheep, a coin and two sons. In the first two, someone goes searching. In the third, the father waits, because sons, unlike sheep and coins, have to choose to come home.

The younger son's request was shocking. Under the Law, an older son received a double share (Deut 21:17), so the younger son stood to inherit about a third, normally only after his father's death. Asking for it early meant selling off family property and publicly breaking with his father. The father allows it. Real love leaves people free.

The son leaves for a Gentile country, blows through the money, and is hit by famine. He attaches himself to a local landowner, who sends him to tend pigs: the clearest possible sign of how far he has fallen from his people and his faith. Even the pigs' feed looks good to him, and no one gives him anything.

His return begins with a hungry calculation, but it is an honest one. He names what he did as sin, against God and against his father, and gives up any claim to be treated as a son. He plans to ask for work as a hired hand.

The father has been watching. He sees him far down the road and runs, which was undignified for a respected elder in that culture, and perhaps a way of reaching his son before the village could shame him. He embraces and kisses him. The confession is cut short by a flurry of restoration: the finest robe (honor), a ring (belonging and authority), sandals (a son, not a servant), and a feast. The father says it plainly: he had lost his son, and now he has him back alive.

Then Jesus turns to the older brother, who stands for the listeners who were grumbling, and maybe for many of us. He has worked faithfully for years, and resentment has quietly built up. He won't go in, and he speaks of his brother only as his father's son, not as his own brother. The father goes out to him, too, with the same tenderness: the older son has been at his side all along, and nothing of the father's has ever been kept from him. The party isn't a reward; it's joy. The story stops at the door. Jesus leaves us to finish it.

The Church reads this parable as a portrait of conversion and of God's mercy. The Catechism traces its steps: misused freedom, misery, honest self-knowledge, the decision to confess, the journey home, and the Father's lavish welcome. It sees in the robe, ring and feast the new life of grace given to those who return (CCC 1439). That welcome is offered concretely in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (CCC 1440–1442, 1468).

For adult life, the parable speaks in at least three directions.

If you have been away from God or the Church for years, the father's posture is your answer. You don't need the perfect speech. Start home; he is already running.

If you love someone who has left, such as a son, a daughter, a spouse or a friend, the father models a costly patience: freedom granted, a lamp left on, no conditions on the embrace.

If you have been faithful for decades and feel unseen, the older son is both a warning and an invitation. Resentment can keep a person outside the celebration while standing right next to the house.

St. Augustine spent years chasing pleasure and ambition before coming home to God, after his mother, St. Monica, had prayed for him for years. He later described his own wandering in the language of this parable.

A real-life step: make an honest examination of conscience this week and go to Confession. If someone you love is far from God, pray for them by name, as Monica did.

> **Church teaching note**
> Church teaching: Only God forgives sin; Christ entrusted this ministry to the apostles and their successors, the bishops and priests (CCC 1441–1442, 1461). Grace always comes first: we can't earn God's forgiveness, and true conversion bears fruit in a changed life (CCC 1431, 1996, 2008).

Talk about it

1. Which part of the story speaks most to your life right now: the son leaving, the father waiting, or the brother outside?
2. The father lets his son go. What does that teach about loving adult children or friends who make choices we disagree with?
3. Where might resentment be keeping you outside the celebration?
4. Catholic connection: what would help you make a good Confession this month (CCC 1468)?

Key verse: Lk 15:20. Look it up in your Bible.