

Congregation, let us open the Bible to the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke and read from verse 17 to the first part of verse 20.

“And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father.”

The theme of this sermon is: “Three parables out of Jesus' mouth.” We will consider three thoughts:

1. The parable of the prodigal son
2. The parable of the waiting father
3. The parable of the eldest son

1. The parable of the prodigal son

The Pharisees and scribes were murmuring. Why? Because Jesus of Nazareth was engaging with publicans and sinners. He received them. He ate with them. How could He possibly do such a thing? They - the Jewish rabbis, the orthodox Pharisees, the men who obeyed the law, the children of Abraham - didn’t understand this. They didn't even *want* to understand it.

For this reason, the Lord Jesus taught five parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost piece of silver, the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the waiting father, and the parable of the eldest son. Jesus wanted to teach the church leaders of those days, that the very purpose of His coming to this earth, was to seek and to save that which is lost.

He said, “*A certain man had two sons*” (see verse 11). We find this more often in the Bible. There are two types of people; there are two ways. For example, we hear in God's Word about Ishmael and Isaac. We read about Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, the good and the bad, the wheat and the tares, and a Pharisee and a publican.

There were two sons. On a certain day, the younger of the two came to his father. He wanted to leave the house. He had more than enough of the restrictive lifestyle in his parents’ home, where he always had the same dull duties. Every day was boring.

He longed to be free, to be his own boss, and to be able to decide for himself what he would do.

Congregation, the picture Jesus creates in verse 12 is actually a picture of your condition. You and I have done exactly the same thing as this boy. What a distressing and shocking thought! In fact, the boy wished his father were dead, because he demanded his portion of the inheritance. Normally, he would be entitled to this inheritance upon his father's death; however, he did not want to wait. Egoistic and greedy as he was, he took one third of the inheritance and went on his journey. The door of his father's farm house closed behind him. As far as he was concerned, he would never come back. He wanted to go far away, out of the country, the further away from his parents' house, the better. Excessive feasting followed, day in and day out, year after year.

Verse 13 says, *"And there wasted his substance with riotous living."* Here Jesus describes the lives of the publicans and sinners, the lives of the people who came to Him and ate with Him.

Congregation, this is also the picture of your life. We have left the LORD our God. We have chosen death instead of life. God made us good, We fled away from God, a way from which there is no return.

Turning away from God starts a downward spiral, as was pictured in the life of the youngest son. Sin is a slippery slope. His money was gone faster than he had imagined. Moreover, the economic situation was not good either. A great famine struck the land. Finally, he had to work in order to support himself. He ended up working for a pig farmer. For a Jewish boy, this was the most humiliating position imaginable in society. At a certain point, he was so hungry that he wanted to fill his empty stomach with pig food. But he was not allowed to eat even that.

But then, eventually, something changed. The Bible says, *"And when he came to himself."* There, with the pigs, in the deepest of his misery – he could not fall any deeper in the mud, in the mire of his lost state – there he came to his senses.

A Jewish proverb says, "Israel needs peelings as food in order to come to repentance." Striking, don't you find? Something happened in the heart of this boy. He came to his senses. Reality dawned on him. He was convicted. In his awful misery and terrible loneliness, he saw how deeply he had sunk. He came to his senses. He evaluated the balance of his life: he was bankrupt, lost.

This boy saw his wicked life pass before his eyes like a bad movie. He had always lived for himself. He lived only for the here and now. Never before had he come to his senses. Now it was different. Home - his thoughts turned to home. He thought of his father.

He even thought about the servants who served his father each day. Matthew Henry writes, "Trials, sanctified by God's grace, prove to be a good means to convert a sinner from the error of his ways."

Beloved, what kind of trials do you need? Because you also must come to your senses. You must come to repentance. A holy unrest must beset you. The Holy Spirit must bring you to a standstill on the broad way that leads to destruction. You must be brought from death to life and be born again to a living hope.

This boy came to himself.

Four things were on his conscience:

First: He had *demande*d his portion of the inheritance from his father. Second: He had *left* his father. Third: He intended to *stay away*. And fourth: He had spent all he had.

In this way, the Lord Jesus describes man by nature: We demanding to be our own god, you wandered away from your Creator, you stayed away, and you have wasted everything! These words picture your misery: demanding, departing, persisting and spoiling. Perhaps you do so in a brutal and ungodly way like Manassah, but it could also be in a decent, pious, and orthodox way like Saul of Tarsus, until the Holy Spirit brings you to a standstill. We read, "*And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants*" (verses 17-19).

In that far away country, he learned four things:

1. He admitted, "*I perish of hunger*"
2. He said, "*I will arise and go to my father*"
3. He confessed, "*I have sinned*"
4. He felt, "*I am no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thy hired servants.*"

Hired servants were laborers who were hired for a day or a part of a day. The lowest position was not too low anymore for this young man.

Do you know how God converts His people? The Lord Jesus explains it in this parable. Conversion takes place through being brought low. Repentance happens at the "feeding trough" of your wretchedness. Your eyes are opened there. There you realize that you live without God, and that it is your own fault. There you realize that the pig feed of this world can never fill your empty soul; on the contrary, it leads you to eternal destruction. This leads you to confess, "I perish from hunger." Why? Because I have done that which is evil in the sight of

God. I deserve His just wrath.

Though he was legally a son, this young man was morally utterly unworthy and without any rights. Yet, he sprang into action. He became holily active. He stood up to go to his father. He resolved to do this; he could not delay. Rev. Matthew Henry admonishes his readers with these words, "Let us rise at once and flee to the Lord, Who receives lost sinners." Beloved, salvation is a one-sided work of God. You can add nothing to it. And yet you must do your utmost. God holds you responsible. You must spring into holy action. Arise! Repent ye, Repent ye! Don't waste your precious time of grace. *"Seek ye the Lord, while He may be found. Call ye upon Him, while He is near."*

The fruit of the repentance worked by God's Spirit is a turning away from the world. Sin becomes death for you. You can't live with it anymore. Young people, imagine that this prodigal son would enter this room and sit down beside you. Imagine that he would put his arm around you and say, "Friend, if there is one person on this earth who knows how miserable it is to be without God and without hope and without Jesus, it's me! If there is one who knows how the world tempts and pulls, it's me! Listen, I also know what everything of this world results in and that it turns out to be one big disappointment. That's why you need to repent. Turn, turn to the Lord. Repent, part with sin, arise, and return! Fall at His feet. Do not delay. The Lord seeks lost sons. He waits to be merciful."

"And he arose, and came to his father" (verse 20). When he came to himself, he came into action. That was not an easy thing to do, because it actually meant that he admitted that he was lost. He was indeed the lost son of his father. We do not know much about the journey back home. One thing we do know: it was a long journey. Why? He had left to go away to a faraway country. So that means that the way back was very long. He was in a very deep pit. And it was his own fault. We also know that he was in an awfully miserable condition, because he cried out in his hunger. He was without strength, desperate, and helpless. Besides, he was broke; he had no money. In reality, he was in no condition to make this long, tiring journey back to his father's house. Do you recognize this? Things are impossible from your side.

And yet, he went. *"And he arose, and came to his father."*

Do you understand the wonder in this? We will see this in our second point.

2. The waiting Father

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (verse 20). This boy's return was not the result of anything he did himself. Rather, it is the fruit of the merciful, loving, and waiting Father alone. This is how the Great Prophet and Teacher portrays the work of His Father. If there is One Who knows the Father and tries His heart, it is His Son, His Only Begotten, the Saviour of sinners.

This parable focuses on the Father. The eyes of the Father, His compassionate heart, His precious feet, His comforting arms, the kiss of His mouth, His neck, His breast, His words, His meal - where will I begin and where will I end when describing the greatness, glory, preciousness, and willingness of the Father? It is all through Him, of Him, and unto Him.

Do you see the father standing in the doorway of the farmhouse? *“But, when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.”* Every single day he stood there on the look-out - worrying, musing, peering, and being full of thoughts. His son had indeed left his father's house, but he had never left his father's heart. There he stands. *“When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.”* Eternal wonder of one-sided, inconceivable love. Oh wonder of God's good pleasure! His son had not strayed too far. He had not sunk too deeply. The distance was not too great, the gulf not too deep. The father's heart kept beating with love and compassion. His love remained: love for a drunkard, for a whoremonger, for a publican, for a great sinner.

The truth about this boy - and the truth about you and me - is this: there is not one that seeks and asks after the Lord. The deepest cause of a person's repentance lies in the Father's look of love, in His loving eyes, and in His compassionate heart. That was the last thing the boy saw and noticed about his father when he left him. No, there were no harsh words or accusations. The last thing he saw in the eyes of his father was love. Those eyes spoke volumes: a silent mouth, a strong handshake, loving eyes and a praying heart.

Father! Yes, the father hated the *sins*, but not the boy himself! This is the same outlook the Lord has today. When will you come, elderly and middle aged? When will you come, young people? Love breaks the hardened heart. God's love humbles and softens. His love brings one to bow down before Him. His love brings one to His feet. His love brings one from feeling worthy to feeling totally unworthy, and from feeling proud to feeling humble.

And so you set out on your journey back, even though the entire world might say, “Why don't you just give up seeking God? Forget about it! Do you think that God will look upon such a sinner as you are? Don't believe that He will receive you. You don't belong!” In spite of the strife and struggles, you go. Why? You can find the explanation in our text, *“But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.”* The Father seeks. The Father draws. His good pleasure and His electing love explain the abundance of salvation. From your side it is a matter of “scarcely being saved” (1 Peter 4:18), but from the side of the waiting and compassionate Father there is abundant salvation. He sees you, congregation! He sees you, young people! *“But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion.”* He is on the look-out. He sees you in your lost state before Him. He sees you in your total depravity! He sees your enmity. He also sees you by being religious, your piousness, and your self-

righteousness - but without grace. He also knows of your needs, your sighs, and your complaints. He knows of your hunger, your misery, your longing for Him, and your desire for His blessed communion. Yes, He looks upon such poor and needy ones and those who tremble at His word.

In like manner, this boy came from that far away country: lost, dirty, hopeless, without strength, and miserable. The journey back to his father's house was long and difficult for him. It was impossible for him to do, in his own strength. But the Father was seeking him and was drawing him with bands of one-sided eternal love. Thus, the impossible journey was yet possible. The closer he came to his father's house, the harder, more difficult, and more impossible everything became. But at the same time: the more you long to come Home; the more you desire and long to cleave unto the Father. Trust me, those returning prodigals are consumed by their homesickness as they come Home.

When the needy seek Him He will mercy
show;
Yea, the weak and helpless Shall His pity
know.

The father was moved with compassion as he was waiting and on the lookout. *"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion."* Something inside him broke. Compassion welled up from the depth of his soul. Likewise, the Lord looked with compassion upon the Scribes and Pharisees. They murmured because He associated with publicans and sinners. In their blindness, they did not understand this. They hated it. Therefore, Jesus warned them and showed them the way. He taught them through parables. In this parable, He portrays His Father as a loving, seeking Father Who is moved with compassion. From all eternity, He has in His great mercy thought of a possible way for lost sinners to come Home and He then opened that way for sinners.

"And ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Visualize it: the son's last meters were so extremely hard. Every step was impossible to take. So heavy, so difficult. All his rights were forfeited. It was impossible! He couldn't do it! It was totally inappropriate! This boy didn't even dare! But then there was the father: he ran from the doorway of the farmhouse to his son and with inward compassion he fell on his neck and kissed him! His son didn't even have the opportunity to say anything. His father kissed his mouth shut. Beloved, all things belonging to salvation flow from the drawing love of the Father.

"And ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Come inside, my boy!
Welcome home! The Father's house and my Fatherly heart are open for you, no matter how starved, how dirty, how wicked you are! You are not too sinful for Me. You are not too

wicked for Me. You have not strayed too far. Son, experience My love, My favour, My compassion, My mercy. Servants, give him the best robe, a ring on his finger! Because you are My child. You will get shoes on your feet again. The fatted calf is slaughtered. We will celebrate! Let us eat, and be merry, for this - my son - was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.

What an eternal wonder it is to fall as a poor, lost creature into the Father's arms. What an eternal wonder to experience His loving arms and the blessed Fatherly kiss!

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him." Those who were standing afar off came closer with weeping and supplication. They came. They saw how this boy received the best robe, shoes on his feet, and a ring on his finger, and they saw the fatted calf. What a great joy this must have brought amongst the servants. *"Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."*

What a great joy for the servants to give their master's son a ring, to clothe him, to put shoes on his feet and to prepare a meal for him. *"And they began to be merry."*

This was the beginning of a feast. It was a spiritual feast with much joy and gladness based on justice and righteousness. Because He who speaks this parable will go to Golgotha. There He will hang as the Lost Son on the cursed cross. For Him, there was no homecoming. He will have to miss the Father's kiss, the Father's love. He will be forsaken of His Father and will not be able to call Him "Father" anymore.

For this reason, the homecoming for lost sinners is based on the merits of the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The foundation of His homecoming is Golgotha, is the empty grave of Joseph of Arimathea, and is His going to the Father's house which has many mansions. Hell-worthy sinners go to heaven only for Jesus's sake. For Jesus' sake, prodigal sons will come Home.

3. The eldest son.

Lastly, the Lord Jesus calls our attention to the eldest son. We read about him in verse 25: *"Now his elder son was in the field."* This son was very dutiful as he worked in the field. That's where he felt at home. He was a hardworking man who was very much aware of his responsibilities. He would be the future landowner. Therefore, the Lord Jesus describes him as the hard-working son, the one who was "at his post." His brother had just been lovingly received and joyfully brought into his father's house. A feast was prepared. The fatted calf was on the table. He had the best robe on, he had the father's ring on his finger, and he had shoes on his feet.

At this moment, the eldest son approached the farmhouse. What was going on there?

Singing and instruments! Different groups of people sang together and music was heard. Without a doubt, it sounded beautiful.

Of course, the eldest son wanted to know what all this meant, so he asked one of the servants. The servant told him what had happened and why they were celebrating with a feast.

For a while it was quiet. But when this message got through to him, he became very angry. *“And he was angry.”* What! Don't talk about his brother - the rebel, the good-for-nothing sloth, the whoremonger, the drunkard! The brother who first showed off as the fun, cool, and rich guy who hung out partying with his so-called friends, but who then - when the money was spent - came home groveling, telling pathetic stories! The elder son was boiling with rage. And then there was also his naive father who fell for it and welcomed his baby-boy with open arms! Ugh! No, he did not want to have anything to do with this! It made him feel sick.

“And he was angry, and would not go in” (verse. 28). Here we see the parable of the eldest son. See the Lord Jesus sitting around a table with publicans and sinners. He eats with them. He eats with prodigal sons. The Pharisees and the Scribes stand outside. They murmur. They are angry. No, they don't want to mingle with that type of people. They distance themselves from them. Imagine! They - the decent ones, the righteous ones - sitting down with sinners?! After all, they are children of Abraham, men of the law!

What a serious reality! The eldest sons stand outside. They become angry and will not go in. The prodigal sons sit inside, awed with quiet wonder about the fact that Jesus wants to eat with them. They can't fathom it and the wonder only becomes greater.

There are two kinds of people: those who stand outside, such as the Pharisees and the eldest sons, will not go in because they are too good in their own eyes. They are too pious to be justified as an ungodly sinner. They are too worthy in themselves to be received as poor, unworthy sinners. They feel too good to be treated as evil people. On the outside they feel better, too, of course, because they live better. And you cannot compare them to adulterers, publicans, and sinners. Outwardly this is true, but inwardly they are just as evil.

Stubborn, blunt, and angry, the eldest son refused to go inside and participate in the feast. No, he would not join company with such an evil brother and a easily persuaded father. This shows the difference. There was no real relationship between him and his father. He felt no love towards his father. Yes, from his father's side to him, indeed there was, but not from his side. He worked only to make money, to build a career, to become important. He was focused on temporary interests. His heart was not in it. There was no true love in his soul for his father, his brother, and the family farm. He was not sincerely attached to any of it. Therefore, sooner or later, it had to come in the open.

“But he became angry and would not go in.” Both the eldest and the youngest son were lost. And so are we, beloved. Because of Adam's deep fall, we lay lost in sin and guilt.

But this is the essential difference: do you know this only intellectually or do you know this with your heart? The lost state of the youngest son was obvious and visible. He had, by God's grace, come to know himself as the lost, prodigal son. The lost state of the eldest son was invisible. Yet, he truly was lost. He had never learned by the uncovering work of the Holy Spirit to consider himself a lost son. How dreadful! Yes, you are orthodox, very religious, yet you are a lost son. You need to come to the realization of your lost condition through the uncovering work of the Holy Spirit. You need to be found out as a lost man or woman. Deep down you don't like that; you hate it. So we see, congregation, we don't have to search far to find a Pharisee...

Two kinds of people, two paths with different destinations: eternal well or eternal woe. Are you the youngest son? Or the eldest? You must know that even eldest sons are called and warmly invited to enter in. Eldest sons: Repent! Turn around! All your religion and orthodoxy, however impressive, will never give true happiness. No matter how serious, it fails. It is weighed, weighed and found wanting. If you are an eldest son, you must be made a lost, prodigal son through the one-sided wonder of God's grace. Because ungodly ones are justified by God; enemies are reconciled with Him, through the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“And he was angry, and would not go in” (verse 28a). The eldest son became even more angry when his father came out of the farmhouse and approached him, kindly and compassionately inviting him in. We read in verse 28, *“Therefore came his father out, and entreated him.”* His father came out again, a second time. The first time he came out to receive his youngest son. The second time he came out to entreat his eldest son to come in and feast with them. *“Therefore came his father out, and entreated him.”* The word which is used in the original language indicates a continual, persistent activity. The father beseeched not only one time, but time and again, repeatedly, seriously, lovingly, compassionately.

Likewise, the Lord comes to us through His Word, from Sabbath day to Sabbath day and during the week to admonish and invite. Eldest sons are called. Eldest sons are begged to come in. Children of wrath are heartily, sincerely, and urgently invited to come. Father beseeches. Yes, you hear it correctly: Father beseeches. The apostle Paul, His ambassador, wrote to the Corinthians and in that way also to us, *“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God”* (2Corinthians 5:20).

You are called. You are warned. Young people, the Lord knocks on the door of your hearts. The way of salvation and deliverance are held up before you. The only Name unto salvation is commended to you. The eldest son can never say, "I was never invited. I was never warned. I never knew the way of salvation." He has no excuse. The same applies to us.

Listen to how the eldest son responded: *"And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gives me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends"* (verse 29). Instead of falling on his knees as a guilty sinner at the feet of his father, he threw out all his bottled up frustrations. "I have always done my best. I have never been disobedient. And what do I get in return? Nothing. I don't even receive an opportunity to feast with my friends. Now your youngest son comes home, that whoremonger, that money waster and you give a feast for him. Father, I don't get it. I don't understand a thing of it. What kind of father are you?"

What does this angry, blunt reaction show us? That he was a self-centered person. Everything centered around himself: what he had done, what he did, and what he didn't get. He felt wronged. He played victim as he said, "Father, you are not fair. You are unjust. I deserve the fatted calf, not my brother. I deserve the ring on my finger, not him. I deserve the best robes. I am good, he is bad. Father, I don't trust you." What a terrible reaction. Oh, he was so blind and full of enmity, while he was so close to his father's house, so very close to the father's heart. Yet, he was so far away. Why? Because love was missing. The root, the foundation of regeneration was missing. There was no broken heart and contrite spirit. Eldest sons are not inwardly renewed. It is only the outside. They are full of self-love and pride.

They are strangers to God and strangers to their own heart. They know no guilt and feel no sorrow. And they have never in their lives asked in truth, "My soul, how shalt thou appear righteous before God?"

There you have the eldest sons. Are you an eldest son? Does this realization hit you? Know, however, that eldest sons are yet welcome. The father still goes out and entreats. It is a good thing if the Lord keeps you from breaking out in terrible sins. You live a decent life. Your lifestyle is respectable. You are religious and have a love for the old truth. That is a good thing. But is that all there is? Because, though the outside might be beautiful, it is the inside that really matters. It is about your heart. The Lord is seeking a heart that is true within. Your heart must be renewed. You must become a prodigal son - and remain such - so that you will repent daily and come to Jesus anew, to Him who receives sinners and eats with them. Then, *"likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repented, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."*

How would you have dealt with the eldest son? What did this father do? You can read it in verse 31. He did not become angry. He did not slam the door in his son's face. He did not say, "You're on your own. Help yourself." No, the father said, "Child! Child!" This was fatherly love. This is God's so-called good-pleasure. This is fatherly compassion, fatherly care, and mercy. This is patience, tolerance, and long-suffering. The Lord Jesus describes here the fathomless compassion and the boundless love and faithfulness of His Father. The eldest son was dead. He was lost. And yet, "Child." The Lord Jesus said to Judas who betrayed Him, "Friend." Oh, what an amazing wonder!

"And they began to be merry" Are you still standing outside murmuring with the scribes and Pharisees? Father still says: "Child." Do you sense His sincere love, His care and compassion? "Child." Condescending lower than this is impossible. "Child, you are always with Me. And all that is Mine is also yours." What a love! "Son, a two-third share is for you. You belong to me. You are my lawful successor. You can forsake me, but I can never forsake you." Beloved, this is the Gospel message, the glad tiding of God's grace for those who stand outside, for lost eldest sons, who assume that they can exist before God in their own self-righteousness. But they deceive themselves. They cannot. This is not the way. They are wrong. Because Jesus is a complete Savior for a complete sinner. Soon the Father's house would be closed for Jesus. And there would be no Father Who would come out to Him. On the contrary, He cried out in the deepest depths of forsakenness, but no help appeared. He remained forsaken by God and man. This was inevitable; there was no other way that the Father's house with its many mansions could be accessible for prodigals.

Thanks to this work of Jesus, prodigals will come Home. Forever Home. Therefore, there is still hope for lost eldest sons to be saved. There publicans and sinners listen with awesome wonder as they sit with Jesus at the table. There we find true gladness. There is genuine joy. Because those that were lost were found. Those that were dead in trespasses and sins were raised to life by the electing love of the Father, the purchasing love of the Son, and the applying love of the Holy Ghost.

"Praise God from Whom all blessings flow!"

We do not know what became of the eldest son. Nothing more is told about him. And we may not let our imaginations run wild. However, I do read that in the middle of the night a Pharisee came to the Lord Jesus; this was Nicodemus. He came with his questions, his doubts, and his struggles to the Great Rabbi. That night became a night he would never forget. From an eldest son he turned into a prodigal son. What do you think of Saul of Tarsus on the way

to Damascus? There the Lord became too strong for him. The wolf became a lamb. The eldest son became the prodigal son, as the fruit of God's work of grace in his heart and life. Therefore, there is still hope and expectation for eldest sons. Still now, the Father is on the lookout. Still now, the Lord is moved with compassion for sinners. There is still joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Yes, that heavenly joy was already experienced by the publicans and sinners as Jesus received them in the house. *"And they began to be merry."* Hereafter their joy shall be full. *"Where streams of pleasures every flow, and boundless joys abide"*

AMEN.

