

## The Mistakes of the Sons

[Joshua 5.2-12](#)

[2 Corinthians 5.16-21](#)

[Luke 15.11-32](#)

I think it is hard for us to take on board how shocking the story of the prodigal son must have been to Jesus' hearers. The father has been deeply shamed by his younger son. By saying he wanted the inheritance right away, the younger son may just as well have been saying 'I wish you were dead'.

By acquiescing to the son's demands, the father is damaging the estate and the ongoing wealth of the family. By his debaucherous behaviour, the son brings further terrible shame on the family. Why doesn't the father do something? Why doesn't he severely punish the son? Why agree to give him the money in the first place? There must have been so many questions.

I think the point Jesus was aiming for was to demonstrate the great love of the father for both his sons, despite the shame they brought him.

The mistakes of the younger son are many and obvious. You don't strip the family wealth. You don't spend the money on wild and debaucherous living. You don't bring shame on your family name. All these things, he did. And we might be feeling pretty good by comparison.

But then he also made other mistakes, mistakes that I know I've made. Firstly, he misunderstood what it meant to be the father's son. You can hear him rehearsing his little speech all the way home: 'I am no longer worthy to be your son.'

He thought his sonship was dependent on his behaviour. But the truth was his sonship never had anything to do with what he had done or failed to do. He was and always would be a son of the father. Likewise, our adoption as children of the Father has absolutely nothing to do with what we have done or failed to do. We are sons and daughters of the Father. And there are no if or but clauses in that sentence.

Secondly, and similarly, he underestimated the father's love. I think those words 'But while he was still far off, his father saw him' are some of the most beautiful in scripture. They form a picture of hope in contrast to the desolation of Genesis 3.

Where God cries out to Adam and Eve in the garden 'Where are you?' Luke 15 answers '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'. The father watches and waits for us, all of us, to turn back. And then he runs. Patriarchs don't run. They don't pick up their robes and run. Shame upon shame. This father, our Father, takes the shame upon himself. Whatever faltering steps we take towards him, he runs towards us. He has been waiting and watching for this moment.

He hugs and kisses us. He puts the best robe around our shoulders. Whatever we have done or failed to do, that robe is the sign that our shame has been taken away and our honour is restored. Don't make the mistake of the younger son and underestimate the Father's love for you.

What about the mistakes of the older son? We also can make the same mistakes he made, especially if we have been Christians for a long time. Ironically, he also seemed to think that sonship was dependent on behaviour and that his behaviour was good enough. He compared his behaviour to that of his brother (a mistake in itself) and judged himself superior (another mistake).

The Corinthians passage this morning, told us to stop regarding each other from a worldly point of view. We are not better than the younger son or anyone else for that matter. We are not to compare and judge. We are saved by grace and not by works; we are adopted into God's family by grace and not by works; we are sons and daughters by grace and not by works. As Corinthians says 'the old has gone, the new has come'. Our message is to be one of reconciliation. Equally loved. Equally included.

The older son makes a further mistake. He has his own speech that he has been rehearsing in anger. He says: 'For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command'.

Have you noticed how the Bible weaves the theme of slavery into the story of salvation? Today's Old Testament reading mentioned it. Verse 9 says: "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." God declares their slavery to be over. He takes away the shame and disgrace of their oppression.

What about how God in the Old Testament is so adamant that people must keep Sabbath? Sabbath is rest and rest is a sign that we are no longer slaves. For the older son to say he has worked like a slave is an affront to all that God our Father has done for us.

The older son never left the father's side, never committed those glaringly obvious sins of the younger son, never brought shame to the family name. And yet also never understood that he was the father's son. Instead, he worked like a slave. Those words must have cut the father to the core. His son was his son. No ifs or buts.

You'll notice the father goes out to this older son too. What we don't know is whether or not the son goes in. The invitation is left hanging. Any step the older son might make in the father's direction—we've seen this happen with the younger son—we know the father will run to him. Any step in his direction, and our Father will run to us. It doesn't matter whether we are feeling like the older son or the younger son. He runs to us.

