

**Pastor Kyle Mercer**  
Two Ways to Be Lost

December 17, 2023  
Series: Plot Twist  
Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

**BIG IDEA – THERE ARE TWO WAYS TO BE LOST &  
ONLY ONE WAY HOME**

That's the bull's-eye. That's the goal. That's what a touchdown looks like at Two Cities Church: changed and transformed lives by Jesus. If you want to know what we hope our church feels like... We're in a new building. What do we want this building to feel like? What do we want this church to feel like? The answer is *new beginnings*. The answer is *second chances*.

The answer is we want this church to be a church where your life could fall apart and be put back together. We want this to be a church where prodigals can come home. What you just saw is a story about a dad with a lost son. Do you ever lose anything? Do you ever lose your phone? The anxiety of losing your phone nowadays, right? Women, do you ever lose the back of an earring? Parents, do you ever lose your mind? We've all done that.

It's one thing to lose something. We can kind of laugh about it. You know, lose a cup, whatever. Have you ever been lost? If you're under 40 years old, the answer is probably "No." You're like, "No. I have a computer with a GPS in my back pocket." Well, many, many years ago, back in 2006 before the iPhone, you could get lost, especially if maybe you were a dad who had a little bit of an ego and you weren't going to ask for directions. You knew exactly where you were going...until you didn't.

The thing about getting lost or being lost is it's often... Not always, but by the time you realize you're lost it's too late, because when you realize you're lost you have all of these emotions. You were lost long before you realized you were lost, but all of a sudden you realize, "I'm lost," and you realize two things. "I don't know where I am, I don't know where I need to go, and I don't even know how to get there."

Well, the Bible talks about lostness as a spiritual state. It often shows up in people being aimless (oh, that's this generation), anxious (oh, that's this generation), and addicted. Oh. So the signs and the symptoms of being lost... By the way (and you'll see this in what I'm going to show you today), most people don't know they're lost. Certain things have to happen in a person's life for them to go, "I am lost," but the signs and the symptoms are there for us all to see.

We live in an addicted, anxious, and aimless generation. Turn to Luke 15. I want us to look at the most famous parable Jesus ever told. I waited until today. We didn't know exactly when we were going to be in this building, but we knew we were going to be in the parables series, and I was like, "No matter what, we're preaching Luke 15 in the new building."

You need to hear this. Not your neighbor, not your wife, not your spouse, not your kids, not your ex. You need to hear this message today. This message tells us there are two ways to be lost and only one way home to God. What I want you to understand is that God reveals himself... You'll see this today, and it's going to make some of you feel uncomfortable.

God reveals himself as a dad in the Bible. It's the primary way in the New Testament God reveals himself. He's a dad looking for his lost sons and daughters. That makes us uncomfortable, because many people do not have a good relationship with their dad. If you want to have an awkward conversation with someone... Next time you have a waitress go "How's your relationship with your dad?" Awkward.

Why is there so much atheism today? We know why there's a lot of atheism: there are no dads around. Listen. How you view God is a reflection of how you view your dad. A lot of people go, "God doesn't exist." No, your dad wasn't around. That's different. Or people go, "God exists, but he kind of wound up the universe and is uninvolved." No, your dad was uninvolved, and he paid for everything, so now you're a deist.

I want you to understand that how you view your dad is going to be a reflection or rejection and affect how you view God in heaven. God is a Father who searches and seeks after the lost, but you have to understand there are two ways to be lost. I'll show you this. Let's go to the text. This is Luke 15:1-2.

**"Now the tax collectors and sinners..."** You know *those* people, right? The sinners, and they know they're sinners. **"...were all drawing near to hear him."** Him is Jesus. People who were not like Jesus liked Jesus. Let me say that again. People who were not like Jesus liked Jesus. When you say "sinner," think of the worst person.

For you it's going to be *those* people. Right? *Those* people who go live an alternative lifestyle in Asheville. *Those* people who drive their Subarus. (No offense if you drive...

We have a few Subarus on staff.) *Those* people who hang out on Trade Street. We know them. They're progressive.

Well, there are the rebellious people, and they're easy to spot. And they know it. If they could be honest, they kind of know it. Maybe most times they're a little proud of it. They're a little rebellious. We'll meet them today. They're a little bold. But they have these other people. Look at them. I mean, many of you are here. Okay? Look.

***"And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled..."*** Because they're religious, and this is what religious people do. They grumble. They get angry. ***"...saying, 'This man [Jesus] receives sinners and eats with them.'"*** So, we're introduced to two groups of people. We're introduced to the *rebellious* (that's the sinners and the tax collectors) and we're introduced to the religious (that's the scribes and the Pharisees).

Now, the religious people of the day, just like today, grumble and think they're better than everybody else. The Pharisees and the scribes were conservative. They were good, moral people. They were religious. They believed that what you needed to do in life was believe in God and be a good person.

Here's the thing. The rebellious people don't like the religious people, and the religious people don't like the rebellious people. The religious people have their shirts tucked in. They're eating at Cracker Barrel. They're like, "Argh! All these rebellious people." Here's what the thing is. By the way, depending on how long you've lived and how much you've experienced, you will find in your heart both rebellion and religion.

Think about this for a second. Sometimes you'll meet a very religious family that has a lot of rules and no relationship, a lot of laws and no love. Have you met this family? Maybe you grew up in this family. Here's what you'll notice about the religious family: the kids in the religious family always rebel.

You're like, "What happened? They homeschooled and had, like, 14 kids and knitted their own clothes. Their son is addicted to cocaine. What's going on?" We know what happened. The kid goes, "Religion is not the answer, and I need to get as far away from religion as possible." He or she thinks rebellion is the answer. See, rebellious people look down on religious people. You have to know there are a lot of people who would put us in the category of *religious*, and they look down on us.

The rebellious people always say something like this to the religious people: "Oh man. You're just primitive. You're archaic. You're small-minded. Honestly, you're boring." That's what rebellious people think about religious people. Religious people think about rebellious people, "Well, we're better than you. We don't have the struggles. Look at how much your life has fallen apart."

See, religious people's sin is self-righteousness. For rebellious people it's unrighteousness. But here's the interesting thing about religious people: religious people often wish they could be bad; they're just too afraid to be bad. Nietzsche said that. Nietzsche said most men think they're good. They're not. They're afraid to be bad. They're not good; they're cowards. That's not the same thing.

Okay. So you have to understand this. There are two groups of people: the religious and the rebellious. Why am I spending so much time talking about this? Because if you don't understand the audience, you can't understand the aim of the parable. Okay. Let's get there. Look with me at verse 11. We're going to drop down to the parable.

***"And he said, 'There was a man who had two sons.'"*** This is a simple story, guys. Very simple. I went to public high school so I have to keep things very simple for myself. There's one dad; there are two sons. The two sons are very different. Now, every dad knows this. Every mom knows this. Every sibling knows this. You're like, "How could two kids who grew up in the exact same home with the exact same parents be so different?"

In fact, let me just say this to you. One of these sons is going to be a prodigal, and some of you are brokenhearted over your prodigal sons or prodigal daughters. Let me tell you why we have prodigal sons and prodigal daughters: because God has given us a free will and a sinful nature. Some of you need to hear this word. You are going to see the best dad in the story who has the worst sons, especially the one son.

So, here's what I want you to know. When you read about these two sons, you are one or both of them. I am one or both of them. *Hermeneutics* is a big, fancy word for how to read the Bible. Here's the best way to read the Bible: when somebody is doing something selfish, sinful, or stupid, that's you (or me) in the story. You are not the dad in the story. God is the dad in the story. This is really good news.

Here's why this is good news: you can't handle (it's why some of you are anxious, depressed, lonely, and everything else) being the main person in the story of your life. Some of you are so discouraged and so depressed about what's going on in your life because you think you're the main character. You're like, "The main character doesn't get sick." You're not the main character. You're like, "The main character isn't single in her 30s." You're not the main character in the story, and it's actually unbelievably freeing.

So, we have this great dad. He's a giver and a forgiver. He has these two rebellious sons, just like you and me. One is rebellious; one is religious. The older son is religious; the younger son is rebellious. Let me show you the story. Here's what happens. You have this great dad. He's also wealthy. He's generous. Look here.

**"And the younger of them..."** This is some of you. **"...said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.'"** Here's what he's doing. He's giving his dad half a peace sign. Some of you will get that on the way home. You're like, "Half a...? Ooh!" That's not a good thing. Okay? **"And he divided his property between them."**

Okay. You have to understand this. This is so bold. By the way, this is how some of you sin. You sin boldly. It's kind of refreshing. If you've been around religious people, you get around a rebellious person and you're like, "Oh, thank God. You tell me the truth. You don't lie. You don't have a private life and a public life and a work life and a home life and a travel life and a business life."

Religious people have all that. Religious people are like, "Everything is together on the outside. Nothing to see here. Nothing to see here." Rebellious people are just bold. He goes to his dad. "Dad, I wish you were dead." That's what he basically says. "I want my inheritance now," which is a third of the property.

Imagine going to your dad. I don't know what kind of dad you have, but if I said this to my dad, he would be doing prison ministry from the inside. "Dad, I need you to sell the second home. I need you to liquidate the mutual funds. I need you to cash out the life insurance policy. I'm leaving." Here's what I want you to understand about sin. This is what all sin does. This is what you and I do every time we sin. We say, "God, I don't want you, but I want your stuff."

The number-one sin in the Bible is idolatry, which is to worship the creation over the Creator. "God, I want sex, but not you; money, but not you; beauty, relationship, food, drink, oceans, beaches, mountains, but not you." Sin always says that, but then sin always says this too, especially rebellion:

"God, I know better. You're a little prudish about your view on sex, and, God, I don't think you understand how much fun getting drunk is. I think you're wrong about the whole 'one man, one woman, one lifetime.' I actually think the hookup/shack-up/breakup culture is good. I don't think I need to tell the truth. I think I can manipulate the world with lies." Oh, really? Every time you sin you say to God, "God, I actually know better than you."

So, here's what he does. Look at verse 13. **"Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had..."** This is where some of you are right now. **"...and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living."** Part of what this is doing is giving us an anatomy of sin. Here's what sin does. Sin takes us farther than we want to go, charges us more than we want to pay, and keeps us longer than we were planning on staying.

Here's what I want you to know about sin: sin is a journey, not a round trip. Every time you're going to sin you're going to go, "This is a round trip. I'm going to do this and it's going to be..." Have you ever told yourself this? "This is going to be the last time. Let me just have a last time with the last times. Let me just do this one more time."

What happens is people think, "I'm in control." This is how it starts, because we don't understand that sin enslaves us and sin hardens us and sin blinds us. So we think, "I'm in control." You'll meet people (there are many people like this) who buy a fifth of liquor Monday through Friday and then buy two-fifths on Saturday so they can have one on the weekend. Nobody starts that way. Nobody is proud of it.

Believe me. You'll meet people in very dark places, and you do not want to meet these people. The things they're looking at and the things they're doing... They're like, "Dude, you don't even want to know the kinds of things I'm looking at online and how long I look at it." Then they have to do that thing of, "How did I get here?" The answer is always the same: one step at a time. That's the only way you get anywhere.

Sin is a journey. Notice he goes away to sin. Everybody goes away to sin. Sometimes it's to Asheville, like I told you, to live an alternative lifestyle. Sometimes it's to Vegas, because what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. A lot of people just go to their bedroom or to their basement or wait until the spouse and the kids are somewhere else. There's something inherently... In fact, we actually like to turn the lights out. People don't even like to watch themselves sin.

So we go away to sin. The other thing is... Do you notice he squanders everything he has? I don't know how much money his dad had. It says in verse 13, "**...he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.**"

He's wasteful. What sin does is wastes the very things God has given us. Here's the thing. Most people (I'm generalizing, but it's true) who are stuck in rebellion... Who are they? They're normally young. Here's why. Rebellion is usually about independence and immediate instant gratification.

People in our culture today do not realize they're going to be 45 years old one day. I promise you. It's like they think, "I might get to 30," but they never think about being 45, so they don't ever think about marriage. They don't think about their sexuality that way. They don't think about their money that way. They don't think about their time that way. They don't think about their body that way. They don't think about their health that way.

By the way, we're preparing as a church now... There's a whole generation that's going to come to our church and other churches like ours in their 50s, and they're going to be so brokenhearted because they've been sold a bill of goods. We're never going to say, "We told you so." What sin does it waste our youth and our time and our energy.

Well, thankfully, he begins to wake up. Look here. Verse 14: "***And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.***" How does God get rebellious people's attention? Answer: pain. Gosh, I wish that wasn't the answer. Right? You wanted me to say "pleasure." I wish. The Bible does say every pleasure is from God, but most people, when they get a raise, don't say, "I should give my life to Christ." Right?

Most people when they have the house and the spouse, when everything is going well... We wish they would go, "I cannot believe how good God has been to me, and because of God's goodness toward me I'm going to turn to him in repentance." For most people it has to be pain. C.S. Lewis said God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us every day, but uses a megaphone in our pain.

Here's the prayer, by the way... If you have a prodigal, pray the Jonah prayer for them. Do you remember Jonah? Jonah is going away on a ship, and he ends up getting thrown off the ship. The Jonah prayer is... I've prayed this for some people. It's a scary prayer. "Lord, destroy the ship they're running away from you on, but save the sinner."

Now, he experiences four types of pain. Do you see the first thing? The first thing it says is that he doesn't have any money left. The book of Proverbs says the man with money has a lot of friends, because he does. "I'll buy you *this*. Come with me. I've got tickets to *that*. Let's go *here*. I've got the country club membership and I've got the boat" and all that. Great.

Then all his money goes away so he has no friends. Guys, I'm just telling you. God will often use financial stress. I knew a guy. He owned a business. He had a mental breakdown because his partner (you know how this stuff works), his now ex-partner, in the business did something. He had such a mental breakdown he used to come home and run laps in a full suit around his neighborhood. Think about the mental place you have to be in to do that.

Finances are an enormous stressor on our lives. Maybe you spent too much or maybe you lost your job, and God often... By the way, for some of you, God is trying to get your attention. Sometimes it's financially. Secondly, sometimes it's through circumstances in our lives that seem arbitrary. It's not his fault there's a famine. Now, it *is* his fault he spent all his money.

Here's what'll happen in your life. You will do foolish, dumb, rebellious, sinful things, and then circumstances in your life that you have no control over will come over and amplify and accelerate your sinful decisions...aka COVID-19. How many of you got to meet yourself during COVID-19? You were like, "I eat too much. I drink too much. I sleep too much. I'm angry at my kids. I'm a lazy worker. I'm scared." Suffering introduces a person to themselves. All COVID did was introduce you to you.

The third type of pain we see is that he's in hunger. Look here. **"...and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything."**

So, God will use financial trials, God will use circumstantial trials, and the third one is physical trials. He's hungry. In the original language it means a state of being. He's not hungry for a meal; he's hungry all the time. He's basically starving. God will often get our attention through physical pains that we don't like...illness, injury, the diagnosis, the phone call from the doctor, just what happens with aging. God often gets our attention.

The final one is relational pain. Did you see that? Did you see it said no one gave him anything? How sad. The last gift he got was from his dad. So he's in a dark place. He has no friends. He has no money. Now, the thing is this would be a great moment for him to repent, but do you see what he does? Everything falls apart, but I want us to go back to verse 16.

It has really gotten bad for him, but then verse 16 says, **"And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything."** This is the lowest point. He loses everything, and then he tries to get a new job. He's working with the pigs now. See, here's what will happen with people. Sometimes people will realize they're in need and will try to fix their problems themselves.

Have you ever met this person? The problem in their life is they need more money. That's why they think rich people make twice what they make and everybody needs an extra \$10,000. Have you ever met the girl or guy who always needs a new boyfriend or girlfriend? It's like, "There she is again. Didn't she just break up with that guy three weeks ago?" "Yeah, but she just met Jimmy. He's so nice." No, she's desperate. This is every Taylor Swift song ever.

So, we think, "What I need is more education, more money, a different boyfriend, a different girlfriend, a different spouse," or whatever it is. He tries to fix it himself, and he finally hits his lowest point where he's working with pigs. I can't do it justice, because it's not a big deal in our society, on how horrible when the readers would



read this or the hearers would hear Jesus tell this that you have a Jewish boy working with an unclean animal, the pigs.

This would be very similar to if we said the biggest Duke fan was the water boy at the UNC game. Like, "What? No!" This is a terrible environment. He's in the lowest of the lowest. It's so bad he wants to eat the food of unclean animals. Well, here's the moment. Look here. Verse 17: "**But when he came to himself...**" Our hope here is that in this room and all over this city in homes and places people would come to themselves.

His heart is less hardened. His mind is open. "**...he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants...'**" He thinks about his dad. "**...have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!**" This is the first moment where he begins to realize "The problem is inside of me, not outside of me."

Often what happens is we tend to think the problem is outside of us. "The problem is my parents. The problem is my spouse. The problem is my boss. The problem is my job. The problem is [whatever]." For the first time he realizes, "Wait. No, something is wrong with me."

Verse 18: "**I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'**" This looks like a good sinner's prayer, we would say, except look at what the second part says. "**Treat me as one of your hired servants.**"

I want you to understand this. This is a profound understanding of the human condition. He goes from rebellion to religion in one verse. He goes from saying, "I want to escape from the father, I want to explore my own life, and I want to enjoy the sinful desires..." He jumps from that all the way to "I want to earn my father's love back." You have to see this. This is key.

He jumps over from rebellion to religion. He doesn't understand repentance and a relationship with God. I'll show you. He's like, "I'm going to go home." He's actually working on his apology. Do you ever work on your apology? "All right. When I get home, I'm going to say to the wife... And if she asks *this*, I'm going to say *this*." Do you ever work on your apology for your parents? "Okay. I'm late, but when I get there I'm going to tell them... And if they say...then I will..." That's what he's doing.

He's working on his apology. "Okay. How can I say this, and how can I be a servant, not a son?" That's religion. "And how can I pay him back?" That's religion. Here's what it says. "**And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off...**" Look at this. We're back to Dad's house. "**...his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.**"

The father is the central character. The father is looking for the son. That's how he sees him. We don't know if the son has been gone for months. We don't know if the son has been gone for years, but it's amazing. This view of God is going to make some of you uncomfortable. This is God expectantly looking and searching for his sons and his daughters. He goes out every day to whatever part of the house it is, and he just looks and looks and looks.

The next thing that's interesting is it says he felt compassion. *Compassion* is basically "I feel sorry for you because of what sin has done to you." A religious person, by the way, doesn't feel that. A religious person says, "Well, that's what you get for doing that." A religious person says, "Oh, good. The dark part of me is glad that happened to you." A religious person thinks they would never get in a situation like that.

The father has compassion when he sees the pain of his son. It says he ran to him. Now, today men run and women run. That's kind of normal. Back then, men didn't run. Slaves ran. Women ran. Children ran. Men didn't run, because they would wear these big tunics, so they would have to hike up their tunic to run, which meant you would have to see their thighs.

One thing we can all agree on, whether we're religious or rebellious in here, is you should never see a man's thighs in public...ever. Amen? Men should never wear short shorts. We have a verse for this. The whole idea is that the father is embarrassing himself. Literally. Technically, he's shaming himself.

Now, there's tradition that said if the son came home after rebellion he could be stoned, so some commentators think the father is running toward him because (what a picture of the gospel) he has to get to him before there's judgment. Then he embraces him. This makes some of us feel very uncomfortable, because maybe you didn't have an affectionate dad.

It says, literally, he hugs him and covers him with kisses. Dads, you need to be so affectionate with your kids, especially even as they get older. I don't care how old they are. You just kiss them. When they say, "I don't like that," they mean, "Please do that more." That's what they mean. That's really what they mean when they say that.

Here's the uncomfortable question: Do you know the kiss of the Father? Sorry. The question was not "Have you been to church?" The question is not "Are you a good person and not a bad person?" The question isn't "Did you pray a prayer?" The question is...*Do you know the affectionate, emotional, dare I say uncomfortable nature of God toward you?*

It's so unbelievable. Look. The son is trying to apologize. He can't even get through it. Look at verse 21. Imagine this. He's not expecting to be embraced like this. ***And the***

***son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants..."***

He can't even get through it, because what the father is going to say is "You can't pay me back." That's religion. "I'm going to bring you back." That's grace and mercy. In fact, he's going to give him gifts. ***"Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet."***

Here's what you need. When a person comes to Christ, especially out of rebellion, they need forgiveness and healing. We've talked a lot in the church about forgiveness, a *lot* about forgiveness. We've talked very little about healing or (maybe some of you don't like the word) restoration.

What has happened here is he says, "Bring the robe." I mean, the son smells and stinks and is mostly naked, and he says, "Bring the best robe." Whose robe is the best robe? The father's robe is the best robe. Then he says, "Bring the ring." Ring? The ring was the symbol of the family authority and, therefore, of the bank account. It was the way you paid. It was the Apple Pay. "Put him back on the Apple Pay account." It's like, "What?"

Then shoes. I mean, guys, how bad did his life get? Have you ever thought, "How bad would my life have to get that I sell my last pair of shoes?" He had shoes when he left and he doesn't have shoes when he comes back. What low point does someone get to where they sell their final pair of shoes and walk back barefoot? We want to be a place here where there is both forgiveness and healing. People need help, hope, and healing when they come to Christ.

Well, he's completely overwhelmed, and then it doesn't end there. By the way, it's easy, especially if he was a religious father... Guess what? He'd be embarrassed by his son. That's what a religious father is. Have you ever met somebody who's religious and their kid rebels? They can't even talk about it.

We had someone in our church... It took them six months to tell us something was wrong with their daughter. It's like, "My life has got to be put together; therefore, my kids have got to be put together, and if anybody finds out what he or she did, it will put a huge stain on our family."

So, the father goes, "Forget all that. I'm throwing a party. I'm welcoming everyone back. We're celebrating that he's no longer in open rebellion but back as part of the family. We're going to celebrate that." So he throws this huge party. Look here. ***"And bring the fattened calf and kill it..."***

In other words, here's what God was saying, because the father represents God. "I've been waiting for you. I've been expecting you. I've been fattening this calf for months (or maybe years), ready to slaughter it the moment you came home." By the way, if you're new, that's all we want to communicate to you. You're like, "Why do they have name tags? Why do they welcome us at the door? Why are people parking? Why are they walking us to our seats?"

It's called *organizational hospitality*, and it's communicating one thing: "We were expecting you, and so was God." That's all we want to communicate. "We were expecting you, so here's a place to park, and here's a place to sit, and here's something to do. We were expecting you because God was expecting you." That's all we want to communicate.

So, he has this fattened calf. He says, "I've been waiting for you." Then look here. He says, "**...and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.**" We are a church that celebrates, and we will celebrate any step someone takes toward Jesus Christ no matter how small. That's what we're going to do. We're going to celebrate it. It's like, "That is a small step, but we're going to celebrate it."

You don't want to miss baptism weekends here. When we do baptisms it's like, "We're going to celebrate it." Sometimes we're so excited we're like, "We're shooting a video about it." About once a year parents will get up here, and they're like, "We all had kids this year, and we're going to try to model the Lord before them and be commissioned." It's like, "Great. We're going to celebrate that."

Every once in a while we bring somebody up. We'll do it at the end of *this* service. "Hey, this person is going on a mission trip, or a mission whatever, and it's the first time. We're going to celebrate it." Now, the problem is not everybody likes to celebrate. Religious people don't like to celebrate.

Look at verse 25. "**Now his older son was in the field...**" I'm just telling you guys. I'm not thinking of any one person. This is some of you 100 percent. The truth is rebellious people are less likely to come to church, because they're like, "Oh, I don't want that. I'm going to go home and get drunk and break commandments." You're rebellious and you know it, and I actually respect the forthright nature.

Religious people come to church, and they know the language. They know how to do the external thing. They know how to look good and sound good. They know how to say they're praying about things when they're not. They know how to say they're struggling with things when they're not.

Let me show you this. It says the older son is working in the field. Why? Here's what religious people do. They love to do things *for* God but not be *with* God. That's exactly what a religious person does. They're very, very busy about... By the way, you're going to see it. This is the key. He's outside the house, not inside the house. He's working for the father but has no relationship with the father. This is the religious spirit.

So, he's religious. Now look. Verse 25: **"...and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing."** What do religious people hate? Music and dancing and anyone having fun anywhere. Right? Have you ever heard the thing...? They say the Baptists back in the day didn't want you to have sex even if you were married because they thought it might lead to dancing. That's what they were afraid of. Religious people cannot handle it when other people are having a good time.

So he's angry. This is so interesting. The older brother... His sin, like all religious people, is much more subtle. Let's see it. So here he is. **"And he called one of the servants..."** Why didn't he call his dad? Because he has no relationship with his dad. That's the religious heart.

**"...and asked what these things meant. And [the servant] said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in."** I heard a story one time about a dad. He has young kids, and he reads this parable to his kids, and he's trying to teach them the lessons we're talking about today.

He says, "Guys, who is the most upset when the Prodigal Son comes home?" The little boy raises his hand and goes, "The fattened calf?" Yeah. After him. Yes. It's not going to go well for him. After him, who's the most upset? The older brother. Look here. It says, **"But he was angry and refused to go in."**

Here's the key, guys. Please don't miss that Dad is the main character in the story. We live in a culture that doesn't respect Dad. Dad is always the dumbest person in the sitcom and the dog saves the day. That's the world we live in. Dad is the hero in this story. So he comes out. Remember how he pursued his rebelliously lost son? He looks out for him, and the moment the son is ready to turn, which is the word for repentance, he's ready to welcome him home.

Then here's what happens. Though the son wants no relationship with the father, the father leaves the party. Maybe it's because I'm an extrovert, but I never want to leave a party. This is a great party. He's hosting it. It's like, "I'm paying for everything." He leaves the party to go to one guy, his older son, and here's what he says.

**"His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father..."** You can tell this in the original language. He says, **"Look..."** Basically, it's derogatory, like, "I don't even address you as 'Dad.' I just talk to you directly." He says, **"Look..."** Then he says this. Here are the words of a religious person: "I did, I did, I did, but I didn't get."

Let me show you. This is what religious people do. **"...these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command..."** Here's what he's saying: "I'm a virgin, Dad. He spent all your money. I give 10 percent and save 10 percent, like a good religious person would. I do, do, do, but I didn't get."

**"...yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"** Full stop. There is no mention in the story of prostitution. This is exactly what religious people do.

They fantasize about what they think the rebellious people in their lives are doing, which is actually more of a reflection of what *they* would do if they rebelled. Religious people always have that one sin that's so much worse than all of the other sins, the sin they would never commit, and this here is the sin of, I guess, being with a prostitute.

He says, "Dad, I did, I did, I did, but I didn't get." This is the sin of self-righteousness. We've all struggled with it. If you've ever been upset that something didn't happen in your life or God didn't answer one of your prayers, you usually have a religious mindset. It's normally like, "Lord, I mean, we were in church and we tithed. I mean, I never articulated it, but here's the deal: I don't get cancer. That's the deal."

Religious people like to keep God close. Here's the thing I want you to understand. The older brother and the younger brother are the same. They both want God's stuff and not God. The rebellious person does it by being very bad; the religious person does it by being very good.

So, the father... Look at this. **"And he said to him, 'Son...'"** In the Greek, the original language, it's the word *teknon*. It's a word that hasn't been used yet when talking about the sons. It means little boy, but it's not demeaning. It's what one older man could only say to another man who's older if he was his dad.

He's like, "Boy, you grew up with me. We played baseball together. I coached your teams. I was at every event. I love you. Everything that is mine is yours." Look at what he says. **"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting [necessary and needed] to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."**

He's looking at his son, and he's looking at the religious people... This is what this means. This is for the scribes and the Pharisees. He's saying, "The Father would like you to come into the party." Hear this. The rebellious person leaves the house and goes far away, so it's clear they're not around. The religious person is around the house but stays outside and never comes inside.

God is saying to both the rebellious person and the religious person, "It's time to come home." In fact, the way... I mean, the parable is over. I finished it. Verse 32 is the end of the parable. Jesus will often do this. This is why we called the series *Plot Twist*. It ends with a shock. It ends with a cliffhanger. You're like, "What?"

Here's what you're supposed to ask. If you're reading it for the first time, you're supposed to go, "Does he come to the party or not? The dad invited him. Is he going to stay outside or is he going to enjoy forgiveness himself, extend forgiveness to his brother, and be part of the family again?"

Here's what Jesus does in this parable, and he has been doing this throughout this whole series. Jesus challenges and, for some of you, changes how you view God and how you view yourself. When you become a Christian or even begin to become awakened to Christianity, this has to happen. At least two things have to happen. You have to view God differently and you have to view yourself differently.

Today, what happens is most people view God as a force. Jesus tells us, no, God has a face and God is a father and at the very center of our faith is a father. Then he has to tell us something else we need to learn. We need to learn this as a church, guys. We need to learn there are two ways to be bad. There are two ways to rebel and run. One is by being rebellious, and one is by being religious.

There are two ways to be lost, but there's only one way home. The way home for both of them was the same. Here's the way home: Come home to your Father. Repent of your self-righteousness, religious person. Repent of your unrighteousness, rebellious person, and come home.

See, here's what's so interesting about the story. The story I just read you, the parable of the prodigal son (which I like to call the *parable of the compassionate father with two lost sons*...that's what it really is), is the last of three parables. I didn't have time to go through the other two, but listen really quickly.

The first parable is a parable about a shepherd who loses one of his sheep. He says, "I lost this one sheep. I have 99, but I'm going to leave the 99 and go after the one." He goes after the one and finds it and brings it back. End of parable. He rejoices. Everyone is happy.

Second parable. Not one out of a hundred, but a woman has one out of ten coins. So we move from sheep to silver. She goes and finds the one coin and she rejoices. She lost 10 percent, not just 1 percent of what she had. She calls everybody to rejoice. Then the third parable is kind of the same except we move from sheep and silver to a son. We move from one in a hundred to one in ten to one in two. You see what's happening here.

At the end, everybody celebrates except for the older brother, but here's what's interesting. There's one thing that's different about this parable. No one goes looking for the son. It's like, "What's wrong with this parable? You look for coins and you look for sheep and you don't look for a son?" Here's why. Biblically and culturally, there was one person in the story who was supposed to go looking...the older brother.

The great sin of religious people is their indifference and apathy to all of those hurting all over the world. So we have to be a church... We realize across your life you're definitely both rebellious and religious. Some of you are very religious in front of people and very rebellious in your personal life. We're both. We're going to reach both.

Here's what I want you to know. Jesus changes how we should view him, because the gospel story tells us Jesus is the greater older brother. What do I mean? He's the greater older brother who went looking for us. Do you know the other reason the brother was so mad when the younger brother came back? Because when he gets the ring and is reinstated in the family, the two-thirds of inheritance gets split again at his dad's death.

So it's going to cost him, and he's going to have to sacrifice personally to bring the younger brother back. That's exactly what Jesus Christ did at the cross. He didn't just pull up the tunic and run; he was stripped naked and hung on a cross for your sin and for mine. If you're at the cross of Christ... How could you look at the cross of Christ and either be religious or rebellious? The goal is to be repentant.

Guys, I want to invite you on our first service to come home. It's always a good time to come home. There's nothing like coming home. If you are rebellious and are in a far country, the word to you is "Turn around." That's it. Come to yourself. Turn around. We'll see you from a long way. God sees you. He's eager to forgive you. The word to the religious is "Come inside."

Do you know that I got a phone call a couple of years ago from a 70-year-old in our church? He said, "Pastor Kyle, I'm calling you because I have to get baptized." I said, "What?" He said, "I'm religiously lost, and I just realized it." I thought, "Oh my god. Somebody in their 70s can be in church but not in Christ."



I want you to come home. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to sing a song about God the Father. Donovan is going to sing it over you, and I just want you to meditate on how good God has been to you in Christ. This song was written about the parable I just preached. The author was so amazed at the kind of Father we have that he said, "You know what? I'm going to sing a whole song about this, and I'm going to call it 'What My Father's Like.'"

He just asked the question, "What type of father would...?" I want you to just meditate on God as your Father, and what he wants from you is to be sons and daughters, not servants. He wants you to come home, and we want this church to be a home and hub for the rebellious and the religious to come in, be grafted into our church, and sent out into the world. Let's pray.

Lord, would you do it? There's a miracle when we see a rebellious person who's stuck in their rebellion be woken up and radically come to Christ. We love those stories, but it's just as miraculous when it's a hard-hearted religious do-gooder who thinks somehow their good deeds and religious activity will save them.

Lord, I pray that as we sing this song, as Donovan sings it over us and we remain seated, we would think, "What kind of God do we have, and what kind of response does it demand of us?" We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.