

**Which Son Are You? It Doesn't Matter!**  
(Inductive Narrative Style)

“Is this it? Is this the place where I’ll spend the rest of my life?” the aging mother hunched on her walker asks her daughter. Now in her eighties with her health declining and social skills eroding, she bluntly cuts to the chase. She’s not impressed with this assisted living place. She wants her house back. She’s annoyed her kids want to sell it. She’s bitter she can’t drive anymore. “But mom, you’ll get the care you need here. This is your new home.” Her daughter signs the paperwork and pays the extravagant \$4000/month. Armed with the power of attorney to sign any legal document and control her bank accounts, her daughter is in complete control. With the car and house sold, the inheritance is in the bank to be used at her discretion. She’ll pay for her expenses, but she feels entitled to some compensation for all her effort, since her siblings, scattered across the country, have left her to take care of her ailing mother alone. Since both finances are now merged, she begins paying for her increased personal costs out of this joint account. Once Mom gets settled, her daughter needs a break. She heads out to Las Vegas to get away from all the stress. Once back, she decides to use this joint account to start paying off her own mortgage. If she’s got the money, she mind as well use it, because any extra inheritance would go to her unhelpful siblings. The ethics of it all start to get very gray. Mom could find a lawyer if she wants, but is she really going to do that? *She doesn't need to know...*

Plenty of people struggle with family difficulties, especially once kids plan to receive the inheritance of aging parents. That’s what makes Jesus’ stories so compelling. The master storyteller, he has a way of connecting his stories to our lives, and in an indirect and poignant way, teaches us more about the very person who’s telling the story all along. Today we hear Jesus’ most famous and extensive parable. We can’t help see how Jesus’ story is our story.

“Dad, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but it’s time to start thinking about your will. You won’t be here forever. You mind as well get it over with.” Jesus’ story featured a man with two sons. The younger asks for his inheritance early. **“Father, give me my share of the estate.”** Selling property before one died was unusual, but not unheard of, in the ancient world. What’s strange is that you would *use* the money ahead of time, not save it to take care of your father. This is putting your father at financial risk when he could need assisted living! Ancient people considered respect for parents even more important than we do now, and the signing of these public documents constitutes a disowning of the family. The ethics of this joint bank account suddenly get very gray.

The son’s motivation for this request quickly becomes apparent: self-indulgence. He wastes no time in leaving, since he concocted this plan all along. ***Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*** “It’s been too much stress dealing with my family. Time to get away! What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas!” A distant land means a Gentile land, far from Israel, far from family, and far from responsibility. With cash in his wallet, with complete anonymity in a foreign land, he has complete freedom to do whatever he wants. Nothing can stop him from spending his Dad’s inheritance on himself... until he throws it all down the drain. He spirals downhill until he hits rock bottom. Then salt is poured on his wounds: a famine hits. Suddenly on the streets with a starving stomach, he’s forced to associate with these very Gentiles by

working for them. “Out there, in the pig pen. That’s where you’ll be working.” Not only is this dirty, disgusting manual farm labor, but pigs were unclean animals to Jews, forbidden in Levitical law code. To a Jew, nothing could be worse. He has abandoned his dignity and cultural identity. He has plummeted so low he has no shame anymore. He wants to eat animal food. He is so poor he longs to stick his head into a pigs’ dirty, slimy feeding trough, but no one gives him anything. At the lowest of his lows in life, he finally sees the irony: his father’s servants have it better than him. He forfeited his right to be a son. He completely messed up. He rehearses this confession again and again, knowing this was ultimately a sin against God. It was all his fault. ***“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.”***

Back home, his father hasn’t forgotten about him. Scanning the distance, longing to see his son, his father sprints out to meet him. He cuts off his confession. All that matters is that he’s home! ***“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.”*** You would expect the father to express his frustration, or at the very least accept the apology, but this father does nothing of the sort. He brings out his best. A robe and ring symbolizes high status. Sandals signify a change in status from barefoot servants to a son. The fattened calf is the best meal of steaks you could have. This father loves this son unconditionally.

This party, though, is not good news, at least to one person. The older son is out in the field, oblivious to what’s going on. That’s significant. The elder brother would receive a double portion of the inheritance by law, since he would have the responsibility of caring for his aging parents. He’s the exact opposite of his younger brother: going his job, being industrious, and contributing to the family farm! Yet he’s just as separated from his father, even though he may be in close proximity. He needs to ask a servant what’s going on, because he doesn’t turn to his father, and certainly not his brother! Once it all comes out, he turns bitter at his father’s treatment of his brother. He has been the good son, he has followed his father, he has obeyed him, yet what has he gotten? No thank-yous, no compliments, no tokens of appreciation! What’s up with that? “He wasted all your money sleeping with prostitutes, Dad! Yet you care for him more than you care for me!” He ends with one final dig. ***“But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”*** He can’t even bring himself to address him as “my brother,” only a derogatory and dismissive “this son of yours.” He is so bitter and self-righteous he cannot even associate with him anymore. Yet his father does not return bitterness with bitterness or get defensive. He considers everything he owns to be his son’s and reaffirms his relationship with him. ***“My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*** This father loves both sons unconditionally.

This parable is a masterpiece of storytelling and indirect communication because it ends on an unresolved note. We don’t know what happened with the first character, the self-indulgent child. Did he become a productive member of the family and care for his father again? We don’t know what happened with the second character, the self-righteous child. Did he get over his bitterness and go into the party? The great irony is that both sons were equally selfish, just from two different angles. The younger son focuses on himself and doesn’t consider his family in his self-indulgence. The older son focuses on himself and doesn’t consider his family in his self-righteousness. Jesus leaves you hanging with the question, ***“Which Son Are You?”***

Are you the self-indulgent child? “Why do my parents care what I watch anymore? I’m in college, and if I want to indulge in lusting after sexy women on movies or cute guys on TV, I can! By the way, why don’t we just throw away the brochures asking for money to build a theological center in Vietnam? They’ve been sitting in the Welcome Center for months and no one’s taken them, because I’m going to spend my money the way I want!” Or are you the self-righteous child? “Have you noticed that attendance has been down the past two months? Why can’t others come as often as I do? By the way, why do we spend so much effort reaching out to Pauline Apartments? They’re the riff-raff of society – the formerly homeless, those who waste the little money they have on smoking and drinking, the place where cops come to calm down domestic disturbances – all while we have richer people in our neighborhood. Why can’t those people come?” Which son are you? You are the self-indulging younger child and the self-righteous older child. We can’t help but see ourselves in both.

The parable of the prodigal son? It’s a misleading title. There were two sons, not one. Yet even those two are not the main characters. This story is the parable of the loving father. That’s what this story is about! The great truth of Jesus’ storytelling is that God the Father is equally selfless to everyone, whether we’re self-indulgent and self-righteous. Once he sees you, beaten and battered on the horizon, his heart goes out to you, “I’ve been waiting for you all along! Why do you feel the need to self-indulgently run away when you will always be part of my family? No matter how much sin is in your life, it doesn’t matter! I forgive you and love you anyways!” Once he sees you festering in bitterness since other people aren’t reaching your expectations, our loving God comes out to talk to you, “I’ve been waiting for you all along! Why do you feel the need to self-righteously look down on others when I’ve given you the best righteousness there is, Jesus’ complete perfection! No matter how much sin is in your life, it doesn’t matter! I forgive you and love you anyways!” **Which Son are You? It Doesn’t Matter!** All because of God’s unconditional love.

This most well-loved story of Jesus ever told has been depicted in artwork around the world. One famous rendition is by Rembrandt, entitled *The Prodigal Son in the Brothel*. Housed in the Old Masters’ Gallery in Dresden, Germany, it takes seriously the elder son’s criticism of his brother wasting his money with prostitutes. So who’s the prodigal, and who’s the prostitute in the brothel with him? It’s a self-portrait of Rembrandt and his wife Saskia. It’s a reminder we can find ourselves in this parable. How can we ever set aside both self-indulgence and self-righteousness in our lives? Only by fixing your eyes on the main character: our loving Father. God’s love is unconditional and not dependent on our selfish actions or righteous obedience. You may be embedded in a self-portrait of Jesus’ parable, but this story isn’t about you. It’s about the loving father who’s waiting with his unconditional love. Amen.