

# Stories from the Road #6

## Stories Jesus tells as he is on his way to die outside Jerusalem<sup>a</sup>

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners<sup>b</sup> were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law<sup>c</sup> muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable<sup>d</sup>...<sup>e</sup>

...<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> "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. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> 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.'" (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)<sup>f</sup>

**Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from the passage?**

**Q. Which character in these stories do you most identify with?**

**Q. What question would you like to ask Jesus?**

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<sup>a</sup> Luke interviews eyewitnesses and writes his biography of Jesus to a particular person. "I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:4). In other words, he wants to add confirmation to what Theophilus already believes about Jesus.

<sup>b</sup> The tax collectors and sinners were the social pariahs of Jesus' day. The sort of people society deemed as undesirable.

<sup>c</sup> Pharisees and teachers of the law were the stereotypical 'good people' of Jesus' day. They were the religious leaders and popular opinion shapers.

<sup>d</sup> A parable is a short story with a sharp edge.

<sup>e</sup> The parable recorded here is the third Jesus tells in a series. The three parables make similar points and this parable extends the ideas further.

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Jesus was generally recognised as a rabbi (teacher) and here he is eating with tax collectors and sinners! In Jesus' day, welcoming someone and eating with them was a strong sign of association. No wonder the Pharisees and teachers of the law were objecting to Jesus' choice of dinner companions. In response to their objection, Jesus tells a story about a Father and his two sons.

First, we meet the younger son. It doesn't take long to realise how this son is lost to his father. Asking for his inheritance while his father is still alive is telling – it suggests he wants his father dead. He isn't interested in a relationship with his father, only what he can get. The request is granted, and he decides to use what he has been given to live a wild party lifestyle. This is self-destructive and eventually the younger son realises that even the hired servants in his father house are better off than he is. He also realises that he has done wrong and doesn't deserve to be restored. He will need to ask his father for mercy. He turns back to his father - the Bible's word for this is 'repentance.'

Next the story focuses on the father. What is the father like? How will he respond when his son returns? He watches for his son and sees his son returning and runs out to meet him. The son tells his father he is sorry and before the son can even suggest he work as a hired servant the father gives orders to start the welcome home party. What is the father like? The father has compassion on his lost son and celebrates his return. If the father represents God then the story teaches that God is ready and willing to forgive and welcome back people who come to him no matter how far they have gone or what they have done. All they need to do is ask for forgiveness.

There is another important character in this story. When the older son realises what's going on he is angry and refuses to join the party. His relationship with the father is also fractured - this time because of his attitude. In his own eyes he is an innocent party and a hard worker who has done nothing wrong. However he too is out of relationship with his father. The older son is proud, he is jealous, and it leads him to judge his brother and his father and cut himself off from relationship with them. Like his younger brother, his actions were self-centred - he just expressed this in a different way.

The story leaves us hanging. What will the older brother do? Will he recognise his pride and hard heartedness and that he too needs to repent to be reconciled to his father? It reminds us that the problem of self-centredness, of sin, expresses itself in many ways, even amongst those whose lives look good on paper.

**Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from what you have just read?**

**Q. In what way has this story confirmed or challenged your understanding of Jesus?**

**Q. What do you want to take away and ponder further?**