

## Give Me My Share

Luke 15:11-32

The third of Jesus' three parables in "God's lost and found department" - Luke 15 - is the longest and most famous of the three. It is a story about a *family*—a father, an older son, and a younger son.

The story begins when the younger son comes to the father and says, "Give me my share of the estate." I have a feeling that for many of us, hearing this parable can put us into a state of spiritual 'auto-drive'. I.e., it is so familiar, we can easily shift our brains into cruise control, and drive right by details that are not only important, but would have caused the first hearer's blood pressure to spike! There are a couple of places in this parable like that. So, let's slow down and take it apart a bit.

First, let's talk about inheritance laws...In ancient times, when a father died, the oldest son always received "a double portion" of what any other child got. If there are two sons, the older would get two-thirds of the estate and so the younger would get one-third. The people who first heard this story, of course, knew that.

### **1. The meaning of the request—verses 11-12.**

So the story opens with the younger son asking for his one-third share of the inheritance. Now, what did that mean, in practical terms? For one thing, the request was stunning, because an inheritance, of course, was not divided up and distributed to the children *until the father died*.

Numerous Biblical commentators have pointed out that in Middle Eastern culture, to ask for an inheritance while the Father is alive, *is to wish him dead*.

The request would then have been a disgrace to the family name, because of the younger son's extraordinary disrespect for his father. We've all heard of relationships between children and parents that have disintegrated to the point where a child will say, "I wish you were dead". I can't imagine any more difficult or hurtful words for a parent to bear... it makes you want to weep to hear that. But that's what this son did.

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Another practical consideration here, to put this into a context for us today, is to think about how this request would have affected the economic standing of the family. There was a different economy, obviously; and Dad here, wouldn't just go out and sell/ or transfer some stocks, or write a check to his son. The wealth of this father would have almost exclusively been in real estate – his wealth was in his land. So to get one third of his net worth, he would have had to *sell* a great deal of his land holdings. And this would have been extraordinarily painful.

I knew some folk years ago that helps me understand this a bit. I was involved with a couple who owned a guest house on the Jersey shore. It had been in their family for at least two generations. They also owned a small parking lot across the street. This woman had a brother who had come back from WWII, with what we would call today “Post Traumatic Stress”, then they called it “Shell Shock” and it went untreated. He was pretty much ignored.

Pete had a very difficult time communicating, rarely spoke, and kind of wandered around, looking dazed. This woman took her brother in, and for the rest of his adult life, he lived under their care at this ‘Guest house’. She cooked for him, took him to the doctor, all that – for nothing. Just love. Well, one day, early summer, they were fixing the porch on the third floor, and “Pete”, forgot; he got up in the middle of the night, walked out the door, and fell to his death. Very sad.

But the story gets even more tragic. As they went through Pete's stuff, they discovered to their amazement, that Pete had an investment portfolio, and he was something of an investment savant. This was over 20 years ago, and he had investments worth well over \$600,000. It also turned out that on an impulse, he had changed his will just weeks before, and left all his estate to a local church. He was having second thoughts about this, and he told his sister that he was going to change that on Monday. He made an appointment with his lawyer. And died on Sunday.

Well, as it turned out, his estate included not only the investments, but he owned half the guest house and parking lot. The family told the church, “We don't care about this money, be blessed with it...” But the church decided to play hard ball... and demanded the value of Pete's share of the “estate” as well. Even though he had lived there for 50 years, for no expense.

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Well, they didn't have the money. They tried fighting it, tried reasoning with the Church's trustees, and failed. And so, in their retirement, they were in danger of losing everything. They considered selling the parking lot, but realized that this would essentially make the guesthouse worthless. Eventually, they had to take out a pretty large mortgage to pay off the church (who already had the \$600+k), now, in their 80s they are still paying on that.

To lose family property – unjustly – is a devastating blow. And I could see that in these people at the time. And maybe that's why the Greek word that is translated “property” here was chosen. It's not the typical word describing ‘things you own’. Instead, the word we find is *bios*, which means, “life”. This younger brother asked for something that was going to tear his father's *life* apart. He divided his *life* up for this son, since the father would have to sell part of his estate in order to give him his share.

In short, this request ripped the family apart. It was a relational and economic act of violence against the family's integrity.

Why would the younger son make such a request?

In his Confessions, Augustine gives us a theory of why we humans do what we do, and especially why we sin. He makes this thought provoking observation:

“A man has murdered another man—what was his motive? Either he desired his wife or his property or ... he would steal to support himself; or else he was afraid of losing something to him; or ... having been injured, he was burning to be revenged.”<sup>1</sup> Augustine goes on to say that even a murderer murders because he *loves something*. He loves romance or wealth or his reputation or something else too much, loves it *inordinately*, loves it more than God, and that is why he murders.

So, Augustine says, that all of our hearts are distorted by “disordered loves.” We love, rest our hearts in, and look to things that are ‘out of place/ order’; we are looking for *things* to give us the

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine Confessions, trans. by H.Chadwick, (Oxford, 1998), Book 2:5.

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joy and meaning that they were never meant to give. We are looking for what only God can give – but looking for *something* else to give that.

So this younger son may have lived with his father and may even have obeyed his father while he was living there, but clearly, he didn't love his father. **The thing he loved, ultimately, was his father's things, not his father.** His heart was set on the wealth and on the comfort, freedom and status that he imagined only wealth could bring him. That was the most important thing to him.

His father, then, was just a means to an end. Now, his patience is over. He is tired of waiting for the things he *really* loved. He knew that his request would be like a knife in his father's heart, but he obviously didn't care. "Give me my share!" he demands.

There is a great irony here, which we will return to later in this series. But let me put it in your mind, here now.

The two sons in the parable look very different, on the surface. One runs off and lives a wild life, unrestrained, self-indulgent... one stays home and obeys and serves his father faithfully.

Yet at the end of the story, the older son is furious with the father and he also humiliates him by refusing to go into the great feast. This is the older son's way of saying that he will not live in the same family with the younger son. So again the family's integrity and the father's heart are under attack – this time by the elder brother.

Why? The elder brother objects *to the expense* of what the father is doing, as we will see. In that he shows his true love. He has been obeying the father to get his things, and not because he loves him, since he is just as willing to put him to shame as his younger brother. *So both the older and younger sons love the father's things, but not the father.*

### **2. The response to the request—verse 12b, 20-24.**

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The younger son's request to the father would have shocked Jesus' listeners, but the father's **response** is even more remarkable. Again, let's remember the historic context. This was a patriarchal society. In this society you were required to show deference and reverence toward those older or above you. This kind of contempt and insolence would not have been tolerated. Ordinarily, it would be met with outrage. The listeners would have expected the father to explode in wrath, to drive the son out - with blows.

Instead, we read the simple words, "so he divided his property [his life] between them."

The older son and anyone else in the community would have thought that the father was being foolish to give in to the younger son's request. But looking back, with the clarity of knowing where this ended up, we know better. If the father had given in to rage, and had perhaps beaten the young man or done something else severe to him, no restoration would have ever happened. The father's heart would have been so hardened he would not have been able to ever receive him back, and the son may never have expected or wanted the father to do so.

By bearing the agony and pain of the son's sin himself, instead of taking revenge, instead of paying the son back by inflicting pain on him, the father, in an amazing act of love and grace kept the door open in the relationship. The father was willing to suffer for the sin of the child, so that some day reconciliation would be possible. (Of course, we can see how the father in this parable so powerfully represents God, the heavenly Father, to us!)

### **3. What have we see so far?**

First, the parable teaches us that whether we are irreligious, free-wheeling, "younger brother" types or moral, religious "elder brother" types, we have a basic human problem with what Augustine calls "inordinate love" or idols of the heart.

For example, imagine a woman who has a husband who spends hours with another woman talking about all his and her problems, and he goes traveling with this woman, and he talks and thinks about her incessantly. So the wife confronts her husband and he says, "What's the

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problem? I married you, didn't I? I pay the mortgage, don't I? I do all my duties, don't I? If someone asks, I say you are my wife. Why are you so upset?" ...Its your heart.

Many are like the elder brother. We may obey all the rules, but our real heart and true passion is something else—our career, or making money, or our children, or peer acceptance, success. If any *thing* has a controlling position in our heart, if *anything* is more important to our happiness than God, and what God desires for us – then that thing is a “god” to us, an “inordinate love.” And it is going to lead us to disappointment and sadness... because it is out of place. It doesn't fit right, it will eventually hurt us.

It is, I think, more than a happenstance that today is a service of Holy Communion. I'm going to extend the invitation of Christ to you in a few moments – to come to his table of Grace. But I will invite you to come recognizing these things for what they are. Do you see any 'inordinate loves' in your own heart and life? Once we see these things for what they are, what can be done about them? Let the Spirit lead you.

A second thing we've seen; we should not miss this: the parable reminds us that our Lord has done for us what the father in the parable did for his son. When God came into this world, we could have expected him to come in wrath, to appear and drive us out with blows and fury. To come with anger against our sin – the kind of thing that we see in the Old Testament. But he did not. He didn't come with a sword in his hand, but with nails in his hands. He didn't come to *bring* judgment, but to *bear* our judgment.

Jesus went to the cross in weakness, and there, voluntarily, his life was literally torn apart. And for his only property left, his garment, they cast lots. But he did it so that, when we repent, when we turn back to him, empty handed, like the younger son, we can know that forgiveness and reconciliation is now available.

And how does this help us with our “disordered loves”? Objectively, it means there is real, true forgiveness for us. Complete, full pardon. Our guilt is dealt with by Jesus' blood. Subjectively,

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(as we talked about in our Lenten series) when we see the absolute beauty of what Jesus has done for us, the purity of his love for us, the intensity of his 'furious longing', it captures our hearts.

Money can't die for us, popularity can't die for us. There is nothing more beautiful in all of reality than the picture of a perfectly complete Being, leaving all the bliss of heaven, and sacrificing everything for the sake of rebellious, undeserving, ungrateful people.

The more you look at Jesus doing that, the more you will love him above anyone or anything else. He will capture your heart so that nothing matters more than he does. When you see what he's done for you, it makes the worst times of life bearable.

But interestingly, it also puts the best times in a different context. We can be grateful, joyful in these gifts, appreciative... but we know, that there is more to our source of joy than the circumstances of our lives. At the center of our very being is something the world didn't give to us. How great the Father's love for us!