

## FINDING OUR TRUE IDENTITY PT 1

Read Luke 15. The story of the prodigal son is one of the most well known Bible stories and yet it is misunderstood. It is typically used in evangelism as an illustration of God's grace. But many Christians don't identify with this. They don't see themselves as the younger son. It is good for those who have been really bad to know they can come back to God, no matter what they have done. But the story is not actually about the younger son. It is about the older son.

The context shows this. V1 Jewish leaders were upset about who Jesus was hanging out with. To eat with these people meant Jesus accepted them. And it is in this context that Jesus tells 3 stories. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son. But actually Jesus never labelled the story that. He said it is a story about *two* sons. At the end the story left hanging. Did the older son go in or not? We don't know. Jesus left the story hanging deliberately to force the listener to ponder. Who am I in this story. The reality is many of us are a lot closer to the Pharisees than we are the younger son. We are the religious ones. WE are the ones who would struggle with Jesus hanging out with the transvestites and the druggies. WE are the ones who would struggle with Jesus having meals with the LGBTqi community. We are the ones who would struggle with Jesus spending time with playboy casino owner who drives the Ferrari

When we fully understand the story, it is possible to see that at times we are like both the younger son and the older son. Story has much to tell us. The younger son represents those who Jesus was hanging out with. The older son represents the Pharisees. Tim Keller Christian author says that the two sons illustrate the two ways we seek to find happiness. Sometimes you can see it worked out in the same family. The oldest sibling in the family is often the parent pleaser. The responsible one who is obedient. They grow up, settle down near Mum and Dad. The younger one tends to be the rebel, the free spirit. They leave home and move to the city to pursue freedom. It is a picture of two basic ways to find fulfilment

The elder son is the moral conformist. They do what is expected by society or the will of God. They may fail at times but then are judged on how intense their regret is. Even in failure they must measure up. Salvation is found in being obedient. The world would be fixed if people did the right thing. Moral people are the solution. Good people go to heaven. Throughout the centuries these views have been very common. Less so today.

The younger son represents those who reject authority. They are suspicious of institutions. People should be free to find their own fulfilment, regardless of conventions and custom. It is all about personal freedom, I will find personal happiness by finding my true self. I will decide what is right or wrong. The problem with the world are those bigoted people who claim to have the truth.

People can fit into one of these camps. Often peoples temperaments lead them one way or the other. Some start off trying moral conformity and feel stifled by it, and dramatically turn to a life of self discovery. Others go in the other direction. Some traditional elder brothers have a release valve where they lead a conventional life but have a secret life of young brother behaviours. Others have very irreligious view and lifestyle who regard conservative people with the all the self righteousness of a Pharisee. But the parable suggests two ways of living and Jesus message is the both approaches are wrong.

The listeners of the story would have been shocked at the younger sons request. In ancient times, the elder son would have gotten 2/3 of the estate and the younger 1/3. The younger son would have expected to get this from his dad. But to ask for it while his dad was still alive was deeply offensive. He is saying I want your stuff but I don't want you. I don't care about the relationship. It was a rejection of community, of values, of all that was important.

The fathers response is even more startling. This was an intensely patriarchal society where it was expected you show the utmost respect for elders and parents. The expected response of a middle eastern father would have been to have physically driven the younger son out. But it says the father simply divided his property. Most of his wealth would have been in the land. So he basically had to sell a portion of his land. Connection to this land would be like that of Māori today to land. It would have been in their family for generations. Their very identities were connected to the land. Their standing in the community was linked to the land. So to sell the land was a huge act of self sacrifice and humiliation within the wider community.

Then it says the son went off into a foreign land. Squandered the money. Henri Nouwen says that every time we go searching for meaning in places other than God we are leaving home. Leaving home doesn't have to look like a life of wild parties and debauchery.

The story of the temptation of Jesus makes this clear. Jesus when he was baptized, came out of the water and it says the Holy Spirit fell on him. Father said. YOU are my dearly beloved Son and you bring me great joy. That is the place of home. Home is the place of love and security and acceptance that every human has a deep longing for.

But home can also be elusive. Certain smells, our sounds or sights can evoke memories of home. But often when we return to the home of our childhood we are disappointed. It is not as we remembered. We have this deep desire for home, but no place or family ever quite satisfies our longings.

We see in Jesus someone who was totally secure in who he was. He didn't need approval from others. He didn't have to conform to others agenda of what the messiah should be



like. He did not crumble when faced with rejection from those close to him. He did not retaliate when insulted.

But what do we see next? Jesus was led into a time of temptation by Satan who questions his identity. If you are the son of God... Jesus is hungry after fasting. Satan says You could turn these rocks into bread. You can meet these needs yourself. You don't need God. Satisfy these needs that you have. Jesus Quotes Scripture. People do not live by bread alone. Scripture found in . Rest of the verse says But by every word from mouth of God. What do these whispers sound like today? You deserve to be happy. Follow your heart. It's ok to follow those desires. You will feel fulfilled. You be you. What does the Scripture say. We don't truly live until we are grounded in what God says. We will never find our identity until we listen to God.

Satan goes on. You can have all the kingdoms of the world. If you bow down to me. Today those whispers look like the pursuit of success, wealth, popularity. So often we try to find our identity in these things. We crave the recognition, the latest toy, the in crowd. But when we pursue these things, we are bowing down not to God but to Satan

Then Satan says if you are the Son of God. Jump off and the angels will protect you. This is the pursuit of power. Of control. We try to be in control of our lives, our family, those around us. We want to feel in control.

Where are we seeking our primary identity from? What voices have you listened to that have formed that identity? The message that you receive and that you hear might well be different from the messages I have heard. But you are receiving them. They bombard you. . It is so easy to search for identity in our places. Places that are temporary. Things that are not permanent. When the devil finished tempting Jesus it says that he left until the next opportune time

#### **What are some of the signs we are not secure in our identity as a child of God?**

- Resent , jealous other people's achievements
- Feel threatened when other people do well.
- Fear missing out
- Worried about what other people think of us anxiety
- Daydream of being famous or wealthy
- Threatened by other peoples views
- Fear rejection by others take offense easily
- Are afraid to speak up and share our views
- Dominate conversations and don't listen to others
- Highly critical of others. Struggle to receive feedback.

All of these are signs that maybe our security our place of home is not where it should be. Henri Nouwen says these words *Here is the mystery of life. I am loved so much that I am free to leave home. The blessing is there from the beginning. I have left it and keep on leaving it. But the Father is always looking for me with outstretched arms to*

*receive me back and whisper again in my ear. You are my beloved. On you my favour rests.*

This is grace I sometimes wonder if the longer we have been Christians, the more we fail to see the grace of God that saved us. I am not like the prodigal we think. I lead a good life. And yet we fail to our blindness. We fail to see that we are so like the prodigal son. Searching in all the wrong places for our sense of identity. We fail to see how much we need God's grace. God's grace is not reliant on what we have done. It is totally reliant on what God has done. All we have to do to receive it is to acknowledge our need. Doctors and lawyers expect people to come to them as the experts. But God has made the first move towards us. He does not wait for us. He went in search of us. He left heaven to become a man, and he is waiting for us to acknowledge the futility of our searching in all wrong places

When we grasp the enormity of the love of God, we begin to see how deeply offensive our rejection of that love is. How our actions humiliate God. But unlike us, God does not sulk or get angry. Havign made the first move, he patiently waits for us, with arms outstretched, longer for us to return from the distant land that promised much and yet delivered nothing.

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## REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

*Who do you think Jesus would hang out with today and would he be criticized by the church for it?*

*Discuss the two sons representing two ways of living. Can you see in similarities in the dynamics of your own family of origin? Which son do you most identify with? Why?*

*Describe what "home" means for you in 3 words. When have you been tempted to "leave home" and find your identity in other places?*

*In the sermon Keith shared some of the different voices that chipped away at his identity as a child of God. Reflect on what some of those voices and messages have been for you?*

*Look at the list of indicators of a person who is not secure in who they are. Can you think of any others? Which ones do you identify with the most?*

*Reflect on the idea that God loves us so much that we free to leave home. What does this tell us about God's love?*

*What practical ways can we strengthen our realization of our true identity as a beloved child of God?*



**CENTRAL BAPTIST**

LOVE GOD : LOVE OTHERS