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RUF Bible Study – The Gospel According to Peter
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The Lost Sons and the Saving God – Luke 15

Have you ever been lost? Do you remember the feeling you had when you were lost? Maybe you were seven years old, and you were left at the mall. Maybe your dad forgot about you after your sister's soccer game. Maybe you were traveling in a strange city, got turned around and found out the last train had left five minutes ago.

Two years ago we lost Anna at the RUF Summer Conference. She must have been five at the time. She'd been missing for about ten minutes when we realized it. We searched and searched. People went up and down the beach and the road looking for her. Julie started freaking out. Everyone started to panic.

We had lost our daughter! Someone had stolen her! She had wandered into the ocean and gotten pulled out in the undertow!

It was the worst feeling ever. You've had that feeling when you've lost something. I left my computer overnight in the dorms where we do freshmen Bible study and didn't realize it until the next morning. Driving back the dorms I just felt sick to my stomach.

But so many of us are still lost, aren't we. We maybe wish we could wander up the security guard² and say, "Excuse me. Can you help me? I don't know what to do with my life after I graduate, and I'm scared." Or: "Will you help me? My parents are divorcing, and I don't know what to do when I go home. I'm lost." Or: "Thank you ma'am. I just broke up, and now I don't know how to live or feel or where my life is going."

We all feel lost. We feel disoriented. Most of us are confidently marching off in a direction. But we don't have any idea where we're really headed. Some of us truly have felt abandoned and left out in the cold.

This text talks about being lost, and it talks about being found. It exposes our hearts and leads us to Jesus.

The classic condition – the younger brother

You've heard this parable I'm sure. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and scribes, and he starts off with a parable about a lost sheep that the shepherd goes out to find. Then another short one about a lost coin that a woman finds. She rejoices.

Then Jesus moves on a longer story. "*There was a man who had two sons.*" The younger son one day had an important conversation with his dad. Something is wrong. We don't know if they hate each other, or if there is tension in the house, but something is really off.

The younger son wants out. He wants his cut of the inheritance so he can take off and get away. *Father, give me my share of the property that is coming to me.* Those words perfectly capture the heart and life of the younger brother – Give me. He wants what he wants. He doesn't care how it affects people, so he asks for something huge.

He's not just asking for a big check. When he gets one third of his inheritance, that means the father has to liquidate his property, his holdings, his animals. The father would be humiliated in his town. Youngest sons just didn't do this. In effect the son is saying to the father, "I wish you were dead." He doesn't care about the relationship at all; he cares about the money. Show me the money.

It's astounding that the father even does this. Most would have just ignored the son and brushed him off. But this father does it. He gives it to him at great cost to himself.

So the younger brother sets off on his great adventure. I picture him flying over to London and getting an unlimited train pass for a year. He's backpacking through Europe. He's buying Guinness pints for everyone in the Dublin pub. He's got pitchers of Sangria at 4am for the Portuguese college girls he's met. Another very possible scenario to apply this situation from this young man to us is that he went to college. For almost all of you, once you got here, all restraints were taken off of you. You have almost absolute freedom, and you have enough money to do whatever you want. Your personal choices are your own. You can be who you want to be and do what you want to do. You can remake yourself. You can study or party. You can stay up or go to bed. It's all about you. College is really a "Give me" time.

If I had recorded you when you were in junior high or high school, many of you wouldn't believe how much you've changed your views or morals. Sometimes I have students who say, "Well, I last really walked with Jesus and went to church when I was in 9th grade." You've drifted away from God and even from some basic morality. In college, that's okay. It's all about you.

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For this series, I used commentaries all throughout the gospels. I listened to sermons by Les Newsom and read a book by Tim Keller – *The Prodigal God* and an article by Edward Clowney – "Sharing the Father's Welcome."

² This illustration is from Les' sermon on this text.

We don't know how much time passes. Maybe a few years go by. All it says is "*he squandered his property with reckless living.*"

But then something happens to the younger brother. There's a drought on the land. This means people who normally might help him turn away instead. The friends he'd made before now won't take him in any more. He's starving, so he takes the only job he could get. He hired himself out to take care of the pigs, which would have been the absolute lowest possible job he could imagine. Jews hated pigs, so he was repudiating all he was and stood for because he was so desperate and hungry. *No one gave him anything.* Here he was at the bottom. He had no one but himself to blame, but I'm sure he tried to blame the economy, or the coldheartedness of people, or even his father who had abandoned him. The man who lived for *Give me* had finally gotten to the bottom and no one would give him anything.

Then something amazing happens. There in the mud of the pigsty, eating pig food, disgusted with himself, he finally hears his conscience. That little voice that talks to you when you're off track, that place inside you that knows what's right and wrong. You try to cover it up, but sometimes when you're at the bottom, you hear it.

You may hear it when you're on the walk back to the car after spending the night at his house. Another hookup? What am I doing? Or when you're washing the puke out of your hair the morning after. Why did I get drunk again? This is bad. Or after cheating again on a test. Have I sunk this low? Or after another night of pornography bingeing. Why can't I stop?

That is your conscience talking to you. Listen to it. Don't mask it any further.

The younger brother's conscience started working. He "came to himself." He realized his father's servants were better off than he was, so why not go back and work for him. It had to be better than this. He fashions a repentance speech: *Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your servants.* That is a great confession. It reminds me of *God have mercy on me, a sinner*, the cry of the tax collector in Luke 18:13. It's the cry of someone who is really seeing herself and wants to change. I don't deserve your love, but I'm going to come and admit my fault and my need. You can do with me what you want.

We should make that prayer often, for we often have younger brother aspects in our lives. Some of you are true younger brothers. You have left what you know and what you've been taught. You have hated your family and what it stands for. You've gone off to college or the big city and you're spreading your wings, sowing your wild oats and being free. You have cast off tradition (Tradition!) and you think the problem with the world is judgmental people. You are for freedom and tolerance. You think the world would be a better place if there were more people like you.

Others of us just have younger brother aspects in life. We haven't made such a dramatic break. But we still have a Give Me mentality. You think you have a right to do whatever you want, and you take that right now and then. You demand your payment, and you go off and spend it. So you may have some secret sin you nurture in your life. Pornography and eating are two common ones. You hid that part away, but it's a younger brother part of you.

When will you see the love of the father? When will you come to your senses? How far down will you have to go? What pigsty are you in right now?

The younger brother finally got up, speech in mind, and found his way back to the father. You know the story. When he was far off, the father saw him. The father had been looking for his son, waiting for his return.

At that point the father sprinted out to him. This would have startled the listeners of the story. Distinguished heads of households did not display this amount of affection or emotions. Most would probably have waited until the son returned all the way, groveled and even then he would have been dismissed. Perhaps he could worm his way back into the family after a decade or so of proving himself. But for what he did...? He had shamed the family.

The father isn't like this. He tucks in his robe and runs to his son. He kisses him affectionately. He showers him with emotion and love. The son starts his confession speech, getting out how he has sinned and wronged the father. He is so sorry. But the father won't let him get it all out. He stops him short of his plan to work as a servant.

The father instead wants full restitution of his son's position and more – he wants to throw a huge, lavish party. Kill the fatted calf! Bring the best robe! Call Kyle Dixon for some dizzy dj action. Put down the dance floor. Bring in the ice sculptures. Tap the beer. Send out the evites – everyone is coming!

He puts a ring on his son's finger and shoes on his feet. They celebrate, at great cost. "*For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*"

That is an amazing picture of grace. That is astounding. The love of the father for the return of the lost son. The father accounted great cost. It cost him his dignity to run out there. It cost him his standing in the community to accept his son. It cost him money – even when his son had squandered what he'd already had. The now-diminished family trust was further divided to include the son who had blown his previously-taken share.

We're all wandering away from home. We're all lost in some part of our lives. Maybe you are fully the younger brother. I pray you will see the love of the father and you'll return home to the open arms of your God. We're prone to wander. We're prone to leave the one we love. But God loves us and will accept us back in his family. Admit that you're lost and you need him. Return home.

The common condition – the elder brother

Okay. We could end there, and many sermons have. It is an awesome picture of God's love for the younger brother. But the text doesn't end there, does it? There's still a hanging tag with the other brother. The older brother. What about him?

I'm convinced the older brother is really the point of this parable in the end. If you look at the beginning of chapter 15, Jesus is telling the parable because *tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him*. (15:1) But he's not telling it to those people. He's telling the parables to the Pharisees and scribes because they were grumbling, "*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*" So he told them this parable.

So the Pharisees are mad that Jesus is spending time with "bad" people. With people like the younger son. Jesus tells these very upset people a parable. You can imagine they're tracking with him as he goes along. Yep, the younger son is a jerk. Yep, the younger son is just like the people "out there" who squander all God has given them. We're with you Jesus!

Then Jesus gets to the part where the father goes out and loves the younger son because he's returned. The Pharisees' faces turn sour. Uh... Jesus. No. That was not where this story was going. This is not good, Jesus.

But yes, there is repentance unto life. Yes, wandering lost people can come back to God if they follow the law and make their sacrifices and do what is required to love Yahweh.

Jesus then turns the screws even tighter. He gets to the older brother, and they must really get mad after that.

The other brother has been working in the field doing what he's supposed to do when the younger brother arrives. The older brother has been faithful, dutiful and good. He's been fulfilling his role as he should. When his younger brother left, he kept his hand at the plow and stayed put.

On this day he hears music. He hears Love Shack playing. He hears dancing. He hears laughter. Ice, Ice Baby comes on. "What's the deal?" he wonders. The servant fills him in on what has happened.

So what does the older brother do? *But he was angry and refused to go in*. (v. 28). The older brother won't enter the party. He's not going to stand for it. It's too much. What about the principle of the thing! What about decency! What about tradition! What about me! He's mad. He's angry. He's pissed off. He has not been appreciated.

So while many of you are younger brothers or have some younger brother in you, most of you here in Oklahoma are older brothers. We tend to gather in our midst the older brothers. How do you know them?

They are dutiful people. They follow the rules. They obey God and their parents. They are uber-responsible. They're virgins. They're Republicans. They're Reformed. They're us. It's me. It's you.

When the father comes out to invite his eldest son into the party, the older brother is rude and off-putting. He says, "*Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.*"

First, he is demeaning to his father. When he says, "Look," at the start of his defense, he is putting his father in his place. He is not taking a humble position, but a superior one. He knows best, and he's going to set the record straight. Many of us are mad at God when things don't go our way. We think we're owed certain things, and we start to talk to God like he's beneath us. Look, God, here's how it is. Look, God, you didn't exactly come through again, but I'll let you off the hook this time. Look, God, you need to do better than this.

Then he starts to talk about how he's servant the father and never disobeyed him. He's been a hard, diligent *worker*. Not a son, but an employee. He's not talking in relational terms with his father. He's talking about duty.

This is huge. This is the way many of us think all the time. We are thinking about what it means we *do* for God. Whereas the younger brother was bad, the older brother is good. He's done the right things. He's stayed at home. He's followed all the rules. He's believed the right things.

But he hates his father and his brother. He's bitter, confused and angry at the grace his brother's being shown. He demands more attention! He demands more credit!

Do you see how his "goodness" has ruined his love for the father? Do you see how far he is away from joy?

I've been reading a great book about authentic brotherhood by Nate Larkin – *Samson and the Pirate Monks*. Larkin talks about his quest for authenticity and a real relationship with God. Here were a few thoughts that stood out to me.

"I wouldn't say my father was exactly a dog lover, but he was definitely a dog *liker*... I think Dad liked them because dogs know their place in the universe. Dogs understand that their job is to be man's best friend. They are loyal, affectionate and – if you train them right – obedient. You can even teach them tricks. Dad was excellent at training dogs..."

Dad liked dogs, but everyone knew he *hated* cats. My father's hatred of cats was one of his defining characteristics. I think what he found most infuriating about felines was their supreme indifference to authority. Cats do not have masters. They take their own counsel, and they really don't care what you think. The three most wasted words in the English language are, 'Here, kitty, kitty...'

When I was a kid, it seemed to me that God liked me for the same reasons – and in the same ways – that Dad liked dogs. I was God's pet. He had brought me home with the expectation that I would be loyal, obedient and useful. All God wanted was for me to be a good dog.

I *wanted* to be a good dog, I really did. There was always a part of me that sincerely loved God. But there was *another* part of me, a *cat* part. The cat in me was defiant and wild and unpredictable, and it didn't care about God in the least. When it sinned, it sinned with impunity.

At every revival, youth rally, and campfire service, I laid that cat part on the altar and did my best to kill it. Still, as everyone knows, cats have multiple lives. Sometimes the cat would go away for awhile, but eventually, after the music had died away and all the Christians had gone home, he would come strolling back in, looking for lunch.

I desperately wanted the dog to be the *real* me, but my inability to behave like a good dog for very long led me to suspect, in moments of despair, that I was really a cat.”³

Do you think God loves the dog part of you? That’s the older brother part and the older brother mentality. That God wants good, obedient, trained people to pet and do tricks. That way of thinking will keep you from the love of the father, because you know deep down that you can’t keep it up. You need to repent of being so good.

It’s an amazing realization you make when you understand that you need to repent not only of your bad deeds, but also of your righteous deeds. That it is your “goodness” that is keeping you from God. He wants YOU, not your good deeds.

It’s a fair strategy many of us try to keep God away. Yes, some of us rebel and go off like the younger brother. We give God the middle finger and just go out and forget all his rules.

But the other strategy is just as effective. You can keep God away by trying to do everything right. By following all the rules. By never giving him occasion to have to stop and talk to you about your sins. Sure, you confess your sins, but it’s perfunctory. It’s dry. You’re confessing your addiction to chocolate or your problem with time management. But it’s not real. It’s not honest and true with tears and sadness. You’re doing it because you’re supposed to do it. You keep God away by being so good and upright and rule-keeping and in the end you hate God for it.

It makes you insecure, and defensive. You hate to get any criticism. You strike out when people don’t like you, or else any criticism just crushes you.

Can you see, like the older brother, you’re using God? You want him to provide for you. The older brother was mad his kingdom was being further subdivided. When the younger brother came back, it meant his share in the inheritance was now significantly lessened. The older brother still had a Give Me approach, it was just nicer and over a longer period of time. He still wanted the father to die. He still wanted the father as far away as possible. His key word is Duty. He was a worker.

Keller tells the illustration about the farmer who grew the greatest and biggest carrot he’d ever seen, so he took it to the king and gave it to him and said, “My lord, this is the greatest carrot I’ve ever grown or will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king was touched and discerned the man’s heart, so as he turned to go, the king said, “Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all.” And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard this. And he said, “My! If that is what you get for a *carrot* – what if you gave the king something better?” So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” But the king discerned his heart and said thank you, and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed.

So the king said, “Let me explain. That gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving *yourself* the horse.”⁴

Many of you are giving yourself the horse. (Put that on a tshirt). Your devotion and dutiful morality are for you, not for God. That’s why you’re so insecure, pray so little and are such poor evangelists. People can sense it. I think it’s also why we often drive the younger brothers out from our midst. They can smell and feel the hypocrisy, and they just want to get out of there. I would imagine the younger brother just couldn’t stand to be around the older brother and his dutiful condemning, haughty attitude.

You catch some of this when the older brother says, “*When that son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!*”

That son of yours. Not “my brother.” Him. Over there. That guy. He’s not one of us. Then he accuses the younger brother of things we don’t know if they’re true or not. There is no love here. No brotherhood. No joy. Just anger.

It ends up that the older brother wanted a party. But he fell into the trap of expecting and wanting a party without ever saying it. He tried the tired line, “Well, you should have known what I wanted. So I don’t have to say it.” That’s an older brother talking about the disappointment of his heart without actually even still expressing it.

The older brother has missed out on joy. He’s been home in body, but he’s been so, so far away. He ends up hating the father and the brother.

The father tells him that he is loved and cared for. He invites him to come inside instead of making such a scene. He wants him to celebrate and be glad for grace.

I think that is an invitation for the older brother to experience the same thing. To experience grace and joy and love and relationship.

But the picture I have is of the older brother standing outside, arms crossed fuming because he’s thinking about how he’s getting screwed over by everyone involved and he deserves better.

Many of us are older brothers, and this parable tells us the older brothers are in worse shape than the younger brothers. Younger brothers finally come to their senses. They hit the bottom and they understand God’s grace. Older

³ *Samson and the Pirate Monks*, pp. 25-26

⁴ *The Prodigal God*, 60-62 – many other non direct quotes are from this book.

brothers don't. They think they're fine. They think they're good to go. They think other people are the problem. They think younger brothers need help and grace, but not them.

I tell you this because I am an older brother. Like I said, we all have parts of each in us, and I think we there are times in our lives when we change. My wife Julie was a younger brother for sure. She was wild, especially in junior high. She can tell some crazy stories. But God got hold of her and she woke up in the pigsty of her life. Since then, she's been trying very hard to be an older brother, which is sad.

Me – I'm just mostly an older brother. I went to church every Sunday. I was a good kid. I made all As. I lettered in sports. I tried to be well-rounded in my activities and interests. I read commentaries on the Chronicle of Narnia books. I listened to Christian music. I didn't have sex, but I sure wanted to, but I didn't because that would be wrong. I tried to date right. To witness right. To study the bible right. The have the right theology. To parent right.

I still try. I try to win God over by my good deeds. I try to keep him away from my heart that way. I try to buy him and I treat you that way.

This is why our group is so mean and cold. Why you are right when you say we are the most pretentious and arrogant Christian group on campus. It's because you are and because I am. I have not modeled true Christianity very well or at all, and for that I am sorry.

This is why we don't have more younger brothers in our midst. Because we tend to drive them away with our rules, theology and snootiness.

I want to repent of this. I don't want to be far from God because I care more about my righteousness than his. Because I care about my damn Reformed theology Presbyterianism than loving Jesus and loving the people who love him.

What is the hope for the elder brothers? Jesus really just leaves him there to think about it, doesn't he? One of the lost sons is found, and I pray more younger brothers would be found in our midst. That we would invite them to find the love of the Father, who loves them with great cost.

For the elder brothers, we need the true elder brother. In the other lost parables in Luke 15, there is someone looking for what is lost. The shepherd looks for the lost sheep. The woman looks for the lost coin. Who should have been looking for the lost brother?

The elder brother in the story should have done this. He should have said to the father, "My brother has acted like a fool and hurt our family, our reputation and our lives. I will go find him. I will take the cost and bear the burden to do this."

He didn't do that, and we've looked at why. But Jesus has done this for us. He is the true elder brother. He did come and search for us. He did bear the shame and the cost for his lost brothers and sisters. He left home in order to go out to seek and save the lost.

In the parable, the father goes out and initiates with each son. He does so with the repentant younger brother, and he also goes out to talk to the angry older brother. God is inviting us into the banquet of his love. He is inviting us into relationship. Jesus is inviting the older brother to the party. He's not a Pharisee to the Pharisees. He loves them. He loves us. He loves me.

God doesn't just love the wild-living free spirit. He also loves the hard-hearted religious person. If you see this, then I'd ask you to repent of your sins. Not just of your sins, but also repent of your goodness. Repent of the things underneath your sins, the things that are your actual saviors, lords, gods and idols. These are the things you think you need to have. The things you get mad at when they're touched and moved. The things that make you feel threatened.

Repent of your badness and repent of your goodness. We have rebelled against God. We have also kept God away by trying to do right all the time. Neither work.

Instead see the love of Jesus who was cast out so we could be brought in. Feel the joy of the father who loves us at great cost to himself. Who sent his son to find us, get us and bring us home. We don't have to pursue every desire of our hearts like the younger brother. Nor do we have to repress the desires like the older brother. We must look to the cross and see the love of Jesus, who paid for us with his very life. There we find life and true freedom to join in the kingdom.

When I went back to the dorms, my computer was still there! I couldn't believe it. It was found! I wouldn't have to tell my wife it had been stolen. I was saved \$2000. Hooray!

Back at summer conference, we eventually found Anna after about ten panic-stricken minutes. We didn't just leave her to find her way home. We didn't give up and say "Oh well, I guess she's gone." We kept searching. Everyone was searching.

She had gotten under the bed in our room, scrunched way to the very back. And she was sleeping. She was so worn out, she had wanted a place to sleep and not be bothered. That's why she hadn't heard us screaming in the room for her. The funny thing is she wasn't ever exactly lost. She was right where she wanted to be. She was oblivious to the terror she had caused. But she was found, and that was all that mattered. We held her tight the rest of the night.

I cannot tell you the relief we had when we found her. We just looked at her, thanking God she was okay. We cried tears of joy.