

AUTHENTIC REPENTANCE
Luke 15:11-32

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever failed?

I am not asking, if you have ever experienced failure. You can experience failure due to circumstances beyond your control. I am asking if you have ever failed...you know, really messed up and made wrong choices that led to catastrophe.

Today we are going to look at a familiar story of failure...and recovery. The story we are going to study is probably the most familiar story that Jesus ever told.

¹¹ *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

¹³ *"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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

¹⁷ *"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ 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.

²¹ *"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

²² *"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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

²⁵ *“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’*

²⁸ *“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*

³¹ *“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² 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.’”*

In 1986 Henri Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer, toured St. Petersburg, Russia, the former Leningrad. While there he visited the famous Hermitage where he saw, among other things, Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Nouwen stood for two hours, mesmerized by this remarkable painting. As he stood there the sun changed, and at every change of the light’s angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. He would later write: “There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day.”

And there are as many portraits in this parable as there are characters in the story. In fact, this parable is so rich in meaning that we are going to study it for the entire month of September. Next week, we will look at this parable with special emphasis on the facet of the forgiving father. The week after, we will revisit the parable to focus on the facet of the bitter brother. The last week of September, we are going to concentrate on the facet of the lavish love of the one who told the story.

But for this week, I want us to direct our attention to the younger son who was a prodigious failure.

As Jesus told the story, he began with a simple statement about a simple family: *“There was a man who had two sons.”* As a story formula, you can tell immediately that this is going to be a parable about contrasts.

If I told you that a priest, a preacher and a rabbi walked into a political convention, you would probably assume that there will follow some contrast between what each clergyman said or did at the convention.

When Jesus told his audience that a certain man had two sons, the people would have sat back and perked up to hear what Jesus was going to say. This was going to be more of a story than a sermon and it would be a story that would compare the two sons. This could get good...really good.

And it did. In this parable, we learn first about the younger of the two sons. This younger son was:

I. Restless then he was Reckless

Let me establish this first: by all indications, this is a parable. These were not actual and historical people that Jesus knew. This was a story that he created to teach a lesson; a story he told to illustrate a truth.

Since Jesus told the story for a specific purpose, there are a lot of details we might wish to know that Jesus did not supply. These details were not vital to his purpose. But inquiring minds might want to know.

For instance, I can't help but wonder how long this son had thought about leaving before he approached his dad and asked for his share of the inheritance and then left home. He may have spent years daydreaming about getting out of Dodge. Or this may have been an impulse decision, a spur-of-the-moment choice made on a whim or in the heat of an argument. We don't know because Jesus didn't tell us.

And Jesus doesn't tell us because, ultimately, it doesn't matter. What we can know for certain is that for some undisclosed reason and for some indeterminate period of time, the younger son had become restless and he wanted to get away from home.

- Maybe there was some sibling rivalry and he couldn't get along with his older brother. It happens.
- Maybe his relationship with his father was strained.
- Maybe he was tired of manual labor on the farm.
- Maybe he had friends who had moved away and he figured they were having a better time than he was.

We do not know and cannot say but clearly, the younger son became restless and ultimately, his restlessness cost him his relationship with his father. He took all the money he could get his hands on and he moved to a far country. His decision cost him his relationship with the family, the farm and the familiar - - but especially, it cost him his relationship with his father. No cell phones or text messaging to maintain contact, no e-mail, MySpace or FaceBook to stay informed, not even a reliable postal service so cards and letters could be exchanged. When the younger son became restless and left home, it cost him his relationship with his father.

And when he got to the far country, his recklessness cost him his money and almost cost him his life. Note some of the words used in the parable.

- He “squandered his wealth”.
- He “spent everything”.
- He “began to be in need”.
- And, eventually, he said he was “starving to death”.

When this young man left home, he forfeited more than he had bargained on. He was separated from the family, the farm and the familiar; he was separated from his father and eventually he was separated from his funds.

All of this began with a restlessness that led to recklessness. And he is not the only person whose restless nature has led him to reckless behavior.

II. **Destitute then he was Resolute**

First he was restless then he was reckless. Later, he was destitute then he was resolute.

As Jesus told the tale, the son went to the far country where he squandered his wealth in wild living. Jesus didn't say that he used his money. He did not say that he spent his money. Certainly not that he invested his money. Jesus said he “squandered” his money.

And we are not told that he spent some of his money...or even most of his money. Jesus said that this son “squandered his wealth” and I take that to mean all of it.

So on what did he squander his fortune? The text merely says “in wild living” and we are left to imagine the details. And you have, haven't you? You have imagined the details. You have filled in the blanks and fleshed out the story...literally...with the sins of the flesh in which you think the boy might have indulged. (Let me warn you, the details you supply reveal more about you than they do about the boy in the story.)

But the real key to what comes next is that the son spent his money...all of it...and then a famine hit the land. That was something on which he had not counted and for which he was not prepared. When the famine hit, not only was he without money, the whole region was struggling.

Before too long, he did not just find himself to be poor, he was, by his own admission, “starving to death”. He was not just broke, he was destitute.

But that was a good thing. Because of his sense of loss, he determined to go home to his father. It cost him everything he *owned* to get to the level of poverty in which he found himself. Then it cost him everything he *was*

to resolve to return to his father. It cost him his pride. It cost him his stubbornness. It cost him his excuses and his explanations.

No longer the restless reckless son who left, a destitute but resolute man decided to return to the farm. And it was his sense of loss that brought him to his senses and led him to his home. As often as not, it is still true that we learn more from our failures than from our successes and we gain more from our losses than we do from our triumphs.

III. **Received then he was Restored**

The son who departed in arrogance came home in humility. He wanted to be wealthy when he left but he was willing to work when he returned. He'd been a son but he was ready to be a servant.

So he retraced his steps back to the farm, back to the familiar and most pointedly, back to his father.

The text, with great significance, says that while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, ran to meet him and welcomed him home. And before the boy ever had a chance to ask about becoming a hired hand on the family farm, his father embraced him, kissed him and restored him to his standing as a son in his household. The dad gave his boy a robe for his shoulders, a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. Then the father butchered the calf he'd been fattening and finishing, threw a party and celebrated the return of the son who had left home.

At one level, it doesn't make sense, you know. This boy wasted a lot of the family fortune...probably about one-third of it. He'd been inappropriate, inconsiderate and intemperate. But when the father saw the authenticity of his repentance, he said he "had to celebrate and be glad." That is the only appropriate response when one you've loved and lost comes back home.

In fact, Jesus said, early in the same chapter of Luke, "*In the same way, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*"

Larry Bryant put it this way in a song he wrote a few years back:
*At the completion of the Golden Gate, no the angels did not celebrate
And when the Wright boys flew their bird, no angelic shouts were heard.*

*There's only one thing that we're sure about
that can make those angels jump and shout
It's when a sinner makes the Lord his choice
- that's when the angels rejoice.*

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*Now when the light bulb first lit up the town
you know the angels did not dance around.
And when the man stepped on the moon
- they didn't sing a victory tune.*

*Now heaven doesn't strike up the band, for any old occasion at hand
It's got to be a special plan to make those angels sing.
Now when the model T first hit the street, it didn't bring all heaven to its
feet.
And when the first computer was born, they didn't blow old Gabriel's horn*

*Now when the United States became a nation, there was no angelic
celebration
But when one lost sinner comes back home, they dance for joy around the
throne.*

*There's only one thing that we're sure about
that can make those angels jump and shout
It's when a sinner makes the Lord his choice
- that's when the angels rejoice.*

CONCLUSION:

Failure for this younger son began when he grew restless and became reckless. Success for the boy began when he came to the end of his resources, came to his senses and came to his father. That's just the way it was. And that's just the way it will always be.

Have you come to the place where you are ready to come to the Father?

INVITATION: # 490 – “Lord, I’m Coming Home”