

Luke 15:11-32 (1984 NIV)
Parable of Under One Roof

Introduction

This well-known parable is often preached with any of these three emphases:

- With the emphasis on the father, underscoring the compassion, mercy, grace, acceptance, and forgiveness of God towards the sinner who repents.
- With the emphasis on the younger (prodigal) son, underscoring the rebellious nature of the sinful man towards God and his ultimate need for God in his life.
- With the emphasis on the elder son, underscoring the self-righteous (holier-than-thou) attitude of people like the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time, and their actual depravity before God.

There is validity in each of these three emphases, but when taken together, I believe what we have here is an overarching emphasis on how human beings should relate to God and to one another if there is to be healing in our sin-sick world.

In other words, this parable gives us insights regarding how God wants us to live and relate to Him and to one another in His spiritual family. With this understanding, I would like to take the liberty to use this parable to speak on how the biological family of today can live and relate in a way that glorifies the name of God.

It is said that when you have a family of imperfect people living together under the same roof, you create just that perfect environment for the inevitable to happen—family conflict.

Like our parable today, family conflict can also be in the form of relational problem between parents and children. It is said that when children grow up to become adolescents, it is a very difficult period for parent-child relationship because adolescence is:

- A period of rapid changes whereby the child between 12 and 17 changes much, and the parent also ages as much as 20 years.
- A period when the teenager acts like a baby even if you treat him like an adult.
- A period when children stop asking their parents questions because they seem to give all the wrong answers; seem to become less intelligent and more ignorant.
- A period when a child is too old to say something cute, but too young to say something serious.

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- A period when the common complaint of the child is—“Mum and Dad just don’t understand me!”

A strong family is one in which members see themselves as together under one roof. Some family relational principles are necessary if the roof is to stay put and not fall down. One principle is ...

I. Never allow personal rights to turn into wrong interests (vv. 11-13).

When there’s an excessive demand for independence in the family, personal rights can override family interests. The younger son in the parable was tired of home. He wanted to get out and do his own things. He wanted independence even though he was not ready to be a responsible person. He wanted pleasure, not labour. He wanted recreation, not responsibility. He wanted his inheritance, not just a monthly allowance. He wanted freedom and to claim his right to the inheritance at all cost even if it meant undermining the interest of the home.

Jewish law stipulated that when a family had two sons, the older would get 2/3 of the father’s estate, and the younger would get the remaining 1/3. This would only be settled at the father’s retirement or death.

But the younger son demanded impatiently, “I want my share now! I want to get away from this home. I want to be on my own. I want to be independent.” He forgot that he was under the same roof as the others. He was not merely showing an independent spirit. More unfortunately, he was showing a selfish and rebellious attitude.

Isn’t it true that when a family member puts his/her personal interest as the overriding concern, he/she will soon alienate himself/herself from the total home life?

A little boy named lived with his family in a trailer. One day someone asked him, “Don’t you wish you had a real home?” His reply was wise beyond his years. He said, “We have a real home. We just don’t have a house to put it in.”

A house and a home are very different. A house is just a physical structure, made perhaps of brick or wood or stone. It can be large or small. It may not have persons inside. If a house does not include persons, the house is not really a home.

By contrast, a home is a haven of shelter, acceptance and unconditional love. It includes at least one person. In a home, each person’s value is unlimited, and their mutual commitment is forever.

Any decent contractor can construct a house, but only God can build a home.

(<https://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/illustration-home-house-family>)

You know what God did when He set up the first human home in the Bible? He did not build a physical house for Adam and Eve, and said to them: “Here, this house with its beautiful roof is my home for you.”

Instead, God brought Adam and Eve together under the open sky in the Garden of Eden in such a way that Eve could be a suitable helpmate for Adam, and Adam could declare that Eve was “flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone”.

In other words, God set up the first human home in the Bible when He created Adam and Eve to be capable of meaningful and intimate relationships with Him and with each other even though there was no roof above their heads.

And we see the younger son in the parable today violating this very first principle of God for the home. In demanding for his personal rights to the family inheritance and to enjoy the things of this world, he had allowed them to become wrong interests in that his relationships with his father and elder brother were severely undermined.

In his youthful impatience and enthusiasm, this young man thought he had already arrived—able to handle his own affairs fully and completely. He scoffed at the control of his father; he wanted freedom, independence, and change. You can almost hear him say: “If I could just go where I want and do what I want, and not have to answer to anyone, I would be really happy. If I could let my passions go wild and satisfy myself whenever I like, and not be under any rules and regulations, and be my own boss, life would be great!”

And so with great impatience, he demanded from his father, “Give me my share of the inheritance, and give it to me NOW!” As I’ve said earlier, Jewish custom then dictated that such inheritance be divided at the father’s retirement or death. Hence in essence, what this young man was saying to his father was this: “You’re already old and useless. Why don’t you just drop dead and let me have my share now. I am capable of taking care of myself without you.”

This younger son was not willing to put aside his own interests and rights, and to work things out with his father. If the roof was shaking, he was all ready to abandon house.

A powerful earthquake measuring 8.2 on the Richter scale almost flattened Armenia (former Soviet territory next to Turkey) in 1989,

killing over 30,000 people in less than 4 minutes. In the midst of utter devastation and chaos, a father left his wife securely at home and rushed to the school where his son was supposed to be, only to discover that the building was as flat as a pancake.

After the traumatic initial shock, he remembered the promise he had made to his son: "No matter what, I'll always be there for you." And tears began to fill his eyes. As he looked at the pile of debris that once was the school, it looked hopeless, but he kept remembering his commitment to his son. He began to concentrate on where he walked his son to class at school every morning.

Remembering his son's classroom would be in the back right corner of the building, he rushed there and started digging through the rubble. Other well-meaning parents tried to pull him off of what was left of the school saying: "It's too late!" "They're dead!" "You can't help!" "Go home!" To each parent he responded with one line: "Are you going to help me now?"

And then he proceeded to dig for his son, stone by stone. The fire chief showed up and tried to pull him off of the school's debris saying, "Fires are breaking out, explosions are happening everywhere. You're in danger. We'll take care of it. Go home!" Again the loving, caring Armenian father asked, "Are you going to help me now?"

The police came and said, "You're endangering others. Go home. We'll handle it!" Yet again he replied, "Are you going to help me now?"

No one helped. Courageously he proceeded alone because he needed to know for himself: "Is my boy alive or is he dead?" He dug for eight hours ... 12 hours ... 24 hours ... 36 hours ... then, in the 38th hour, he pulled back a boulder and heard his son's voice. He screamed his son's name, "Armand!"

He heard back, "Dad!? It's me, Dad! I told the other kids not to worry. I told them that if you were alive, you'd save me and when you saved me, they'd be saved too. You promised, 'No matter what, I'll always be there for you!' You did it, Dad!"

"What's going on in there? How is it?" the father asked.

"There are 14 of us here. When the building collapsed, it made a wedge, like a triangle, and it saved us."

"Come out, boy!"

“No, Dad! Let the other kids out first, because I know you’ll get me. No matter what, I know you’ll be there for me!”

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/70289/in-1989-a-terrible-earthquake-almost-flattened-by-sermon-central>)

The pressures of modern living make the family today very fragile indeed. In times like these, we need the commitment to say to one another in the family, “No matter what, I’ll be there for you.”

- It means putting aside our own interest for the time being for the bigger welfare of the family.
- It means stopping what you like to do in order to work on what is good for the family.
- It means not insisting on being free to run your own life and do your own things, but committing yourself to share life and do things with other family members.
- It means not walking out of your family when the situation is tough, but staying put to work through the difficulties.
- It means not demanding that you have your way immediately, but learning to be patient and self-controlled as a way of being responsible and accountable to others in the family.
- It means each family member saying to one another, “No matter what, I’ll be there for you, even if it means putting aside my own interests.”

A strong family is one in which members see themselves as together under one roof. Some family relational principles are necessary if the roof is to stay put and not fall down. One principle is never allow personal rights to turn into wrong interests.

A second principle is ...

II. Never allow individual wrongs to undermine compassion (vv. 14-24).

Notice that when the younger son left home, he showed no compassion for his father. He couldn’t be bothered about the pain in his father’s heart. He was only interested in having a great time for himself.

He took his share of the inheritance, gathered everything, and went into the far country. He spent money with a lavish hand. He tried anything and everything, especially things that had formerly been forbidden him.

Soon, his good times came to an end. The parable goes on to tell us that he began to take stock of his empty life—right there in the pigsty with an empty wallet and an empty stomach. And v. 17 tells us that “he came to his senses”. At last, reality dawned on him—he discovered that he was chained to his

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urges and wanton desires. He couldn't break free from them, and he could never satisfy them in spite of all his indulgence and extravagance. He was seeking so much for freedom, but he finally realized that he was never free at all. The things he had wanted so much when he left his father's house were found not in the far country, but in his father's house instead—i.e. food, love, companionship, significance. What a sad irony indeed!

Is it not true and unfortunate that we often learn our lesson best the hard way—i.e. going a big circle and suffering the consequences of our own choices? This was the very experience of the younger son.

Some may have pointed a finger at the father and accused him of being a pampering father who failed to exercise his responsibility to stop his son. But I believe the father did not stop his son because he knew very well that this stubborn son would refuse to be deterred. He knew that the only way for his son to learn (and to learn well) was for him to be disciplined by the consequences of his own actions.

Hence, he was not a pampering father who had spoilt his son, but a waiting father who loved his son enough to allow him to be disciplined by consequences, even though it's painful for him to see his son suffer those consequences.

The reality of life is that love that is not appreciated but spurned often turns itself into hatred/resentment for that person who has wronged us. The father in our parable today did not allow the wrong of his son to undermine his compassion for him. It must be very painful for him to wait and let the consequences of wrong decisions hit his wayward son. But he didn't let that pain turn into hatred/resentment towards his son. We see this in his response when he saw his son returning home.

He did not take the young man's defeated homecoming as an opportunity to ridicule, get back at, or humiliate him. Instead, v. 20 tells us that while the son "was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, throw his arms around him and kissed him".

The word "compassion" really has reference to the inner organs of the human body (literally, the "bowels"). It suggests that you feel so deeply inside you that you are moved to do something. When used in the gospels to describe Jesus' response, this word always points to Jesus being moved to take some actions that eventually affected or changed the lives of people because they were enabled to set a new course in life—when people are going in the wrong direction, the Lord helps them to make U-turns in their lives. This best describes the idea of the Lord's compassion for people.

When the younger son "came to his senses" in v. 17, it was not just a realization that his father's house offered better material comfort and security

than the outside world. More importantly, it was an indication of the son's repentant spirit because v. 21 tells us that he confessed that he had sinned against God and his father. The prodigal son's homecoming was a happy one because the repentant heart of the son was greeted by the compassionate heart of the father when they were reunited.

We often rub one another the wrong way. We don't always do nice and right things to one another. We hurt others with our wrong actions and misdoings. Hence we need to exercise compassion, not by just passively hoping for the wayward person to take a new course of action, but by actively taking some actions to help that person do so. And that may mean making the first move on our part, even if it means confronting a person but in God's love.

A strong family is one in which members see themselves as together under one roof. Some family relational principles are necessary if the roof is to stay put and not fall down. One principle is never allow personal rights to turn into wrong interests. A second principle is never allow individual wrongs to undermine compassion.

One last principle we want to consider today is ...

III. Never allow self-righteousness to blind need for personal changes (vv. 25-32).

Now, notice the older son's emphasis on his own merits in the parable in v. 29a: "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders." As far as he was concerned, he had always been doing right, and that automatically led him to think that everybody else was wrong.

Note the accusing tone in his voice when he spoke to the father in vv. 29b-30: "You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours (note the spiteful term—"this son of yours", not "my brother") who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

"Father, your younger son is so wrong to have run away. And you are also so wrong to welcome him back. I'm the only person who is right in this family." This is the self-righteous and "always right" attitude of the older son.

I did not have an easy relationship with my father when he was alive. He always had his ways at home not because he was always right or reasonable, but he was always louder and more aggressive in any situation. My mother and I would always give in to him just to keep the peace. After all, when I was young, I needed his money to keep me going. But deep inside me, I harboured much resentment towards him because I believed he was always so wrong, and I was always so right.

My father died when I was 25. I was still a young Christian then. I remember returning home one day and found my father resting in the living room. He looked at me and called me not by my name, but that of my cousin. I felt rather strange that he could not recognize me. I told him who I was, and he asked me to support him to his room to rest. He was not feeling well for the next few days, saw a doctor, and stayed at home. During these few days, he would ask my mother to cook some of his favourite dishes and he would want us to be at home and eat as a family.

One morning, my father asked me to support him to the toilet. Having done that, I left the house for work. Just after I had left the house, my father suffered a stroke. He could not get up from the toilet seat. He kept calling for me but I was already gone for work. My mother sensed that something was very wrong with him and called the ambulance. The paramedics came and took him to the hospital.

When I visited him in the evening, the whole right side of his body was already paralyzed. He asked me to help him sit up. I sat on his bed and supported him by leaning my body against his back. And I began to massage his body. As I was doing that, I suddenly realized that I was doing a very loving thing to a man whom I resented a lot. I looked at his state of helplessness and I realized that here was not a loud and aggressive person, but really, an imperfect person who could do wrong and who would need help. Somehow, I had decided to forgive him that evening. It was a very beautiful time between my father and me.

Next evening, we received news that my father was in critical condition—there was bleeding in his brain and he was in a coma. The doctor said that he would need surgery. But he added that if my father should survive, he would very likely end up as a vegetable.

My mother was not keen on the surgery. I was asked by the doctor to decide. I remember sitting there for ... (I don't know how long), struggling with the decision. If I had decided not to sign the consent form, it would seem I had robbed my father of a chance to live, no matter how slim it was. But if I had decided to sign the consent and he survived as a vegetable, it would be very difficult for us to care for him.

In the midst of this great struggle, I remember turning to God and asking Him to help me make a decision. By the way, I was a backslidden Christian at that time and that was the first time I prayed to God after a very, very long time.

Not long later, the doctor came and told me that my father had deteriorated so badly that it would be best to "let him go peacefully". In a sense, I believed that was God's answer to my prayer. The doctor

advised my mother and me to go home and rest, and the hospital would notify us of any eventuality.

As I was walking out with my mother, I felt a very strong urge to go back to the ICU to talk to my father. It was as if God was prompting me this: "Hey, you still have something to settle with your father before you go."

So, I walked back to the ICU to where my father was. He was heavily strapped with all the life-support systems. I touched his hand and I said: "Pa, I am not sure if you can hear me, or if you understand me even if you can hear me. But you know, I feel very hurt by you in many ways. Today, I think Jesus wants me to tell you this and to let you know that even though I feel hurt by you, I want to forgive you. I also need forgiveness because I am imperfect and Jesus has forgiven me. If you can hear and understand me, you tell Jesus in your heart that you believe Him, and ask Him to forgive you as well."

With that, I said my last words to my father. He died about five hours later. Indeed, a few words of honour said to a living parent is better than a thousand eulogies when that person is dead and gone. I thank God that He had given me the opportunity to say those few words to my father while he was still breathing. I thank God for those brief, tender moments of family life I had enjoyed with my father in his last few days.

Today, I can share this personal testimony with you because the Lord taught me that my late father was not one who was always wrong, and I was not one who was always right.

The "I-am-always-right" attitude will undermine the strength of the family. The one who harbours it will manifest at least 4 unhealthy traits:

- One, the spirit of being victimized, unfairly treated, ignored, and disregarded. Like the older son, the person will complain, "I've done everything and anything for others, but I get nothing in return!"
- Two, the spirit of being better than others. With an inflated ego, the person will boast like the older son, "I'm so much better than the other person. I can never be so wrong like him!"
- Three, the spirit of contempt and resentment. "I've tried all I can to keep things together. It is all your fault that everything is falling apart now. All my effort has gone to waste!"
- Four, the spirit of distrust. "I've done everything to the best I can. Yet you have not given me what I deserve. How can I ever trust you again? You are so biased against me!"

Sense of unfair treatment, ego, contempt and resentment towards others, distrust—all these make up a sure combination of destabilizing forces to bring down the roof.

Jesus used this parable to rebuke the scribes and Pharisees for their self-righteousness. They were like the older son in the story who thought that he was the only one who's right in the family.

Today, Jesus is teaching this same principle for our own family situation—never allow self-righteousness to blind our need for personal changes. No one is too right to change for the better.

Conclusion

The pressures of modern living exert great destabilizing forces on the family today. To help the family stay strong through all these, each family member has a part to play:

- Never allow personal rights to turn into wrong interests.
- Never allow individual wrongs to undermine compassion.
- Never allow self-righteousness to blind need for personal changes.

God's will is that the family who stay under one roof be strong under the covering of His divine grace.

Let's seek the Lord to help us build strong Christian homes so that His name will be honoured in our family relationships, and be glorified in our Christian witness. Amen!