

The ROAD HOME *By Randy Loescher*

With a deep sigh of satisfaction, I wiped sweat from my forehead and admired our day's work. Effective delegation led to the most efficient care of our animals ever. With God's favor, our new agricultural innovations should result in an exceptionally fruitful harvest. Father will be pleased.

Beginning my trek back to the house, I was met by the aroma of roasted calf and the sound of festive music. "What's going on?" I asked a nearby servant.

"Your brother finally returned, and your father called for a celebration."

"What?!" Anger, jealousy, and resentment flooded my being like a spring thunderstorm rushing in from the horizon. Running from the house to meet me, my father pleaded with me to join the festivities.

Infuriated, I exploded. "Look! All these years I've

slaved for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf! This is not fair!"

Both "sinners" and religious leaders listened with great interest as Jesus shared the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Both illustrate how heaven rejoices when one sinner repents. The third parable, known as The Prodigal Son, came with a twist. Knowing the religious leaders, Jesus added another element, an elder brother meant to represent their wicked hearts.

Rather than share in his father's joy, the elder brother wallowed in self-pity, anger, and resentment. Despising the father's undeserved love toward the younger brother, this son's hot-headed retort revealed his own performance-based relationship with the father. Faithful, dedicated, compliant, productive - the elder son exhibited all these qualities.

And yet, while his younger brother was lost in a far country, the older son was lost at home. The prodigal's sins were blatant, worldly, in-your-face. The elder brother's sins were inward and discreet - jealousy, pride, anger, resentment - revealed only when confronted with the father's undeserved demonstration of love. Loving his firstborn just as much as the younger son, the father

similarly ran out to meet him and assured him, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." Both sons were lost. Both needed to "return home."

Both needed their father's expression of undeserved love. But what was the road home? Humility and repentance.

We may not identify much with the prodigal son, but do we identify with the elder brother? Has our relationship with the Father grown cold as we become more performance-oriented, faithfully doing the Lord's work? Are we outwardly racing around while dying on the

inside, hoping for our Father's approval? Are we lost at home? What will it take for us to return to the Father's embrace?

Humility and repentance. When the sins we fight are no longer blatant, we can forget to let the Holy Spirit continue His work in our hearts. Our focus turns towards serving the Father. Or, having been

generally "good" all our lives, never the prodigal, we may have accepted Christ without much repentance because "we weren't that bad." Like compliant firstborns who want to please their parents, we became followers of Christ because it's the right thing to do.

Defending the prostitute who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, Jesus stated, "He who has been forgiven much loves much. He who has been forgiven little loves little."

Without traveling the road of true repentance, we cannot fully appreciate the forgiveness and unconditional love that come with the Father's embrace. When we allow God's Spirit to convict our hearts and we then respond in humble repentance, our love for the Father will grow deeper. Our understanding of His lavish love will expand. Thus, the road of regular, humble repentance is one sure road home to our first love, to our Father's embrace. Jesus left this parable open-ended. He never described the elder son's ultimate response. Did he remain lost while at home? Or did he, through humble repentance, return home with the father?

What will be our response to the Father's invitation to return home to our first love and to His embrace? Which road will we take? The road of pride, continued performance-based faithfulness to the Father or the road of humble repentance?



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This article is abridged. Scroll down to read the article in its entirety

**From Luke 15. Ideas derived from The Return of the Prodigal Son, by Henri Nouwen.*



The Road Home

By Randy Loescher

Plodding down the road with hunger pangs churning in my stomach, I felt every bit the homeless wanderer I had become. The hot sun beat relentlessly on my back. My dry tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I yearned for just a couple drops of cool water. My feet, blistered and burning, had worn through the soles of my sandals in several places. Days had passed since my last bath. My skin and ragged clothes were covered with dust and filth. Taken aback by my unkempt appearance, other travelers carefully passed me on the other side of the road.

Alone, without friends, food, water, decent clothes or money, I had plenty of time to reflect. It had all been fun at first and for a time – the nice clothes, the lavish parties, the women, the recreation, the so-called friends who used me. But my irresponsibility finally caught up with me. Now penniless, friendless, and full of shame, I had taken a job feeding pigs.

I wonder. If I were to admit my sin and failure and humble myself before my father, would he receive me back? Would he at least give me a job where food, clothing, and shelter would be guaranteed? I must return.

Almost home. Almost there. Just a little bit further. *Oh, let my father be merciful.*

Parched and exhausted, I looked into the distance. *Who's that? Someone's running.* I recognized the cloak. Stunned, I stopped as the figure quickly approached. Before I could comprehend what was happening, my father threw his arms around me and kissed me. I had not even spoken yet. He cared not about my bedraggled appearance and body odor; he just held me, laughing and crying at the same time. It was as though he knew my heart before I spoke the words.

"I'm so sorry, Father. I have sinned against you. I'm not worthy to be called your son."

His embrace conveyed forgiveness and unconditional love. My father's eyes danced with delight as he ordered his servants to prepare a party, a celebration in my honor. In spite of my dirty, grungy attire, I felt somehow clean, cleansed from my past carnality and ignorance. My formerly empty, aching heart now overflowed with a profound sense of acceptance and relief. I was home...not just in my father's home, but home in my father's embrace.

The familiar story of the Lost (Prodigal) Son reminds us of how great God's love and desire for us is. Our Father does not just call us to return to our first love; he looks down the road in anticipation of our return. Running was undignified for a Middle Eastern man, and yet the lost son's father ran. The Father longs for us, and when He sees our efforts to return home, He runs down the road to meet us, embrace us and forgive us.

What's the road the young son took to return to the father? Repentance. After coming to the end of his resources and self-reliance, he decided to humble himself by repenting to his father. Confessing his sinfulness and unworthiness, the prodigal asked to return home. Not only was the son welcomed back into his father's home, he was invited

back into his father's embrace.

Repentance serves as one of the most effective roads back home to the Father and to the Father's embrace. Each experience of the Father's forgiveness causes our love for him to grow. Just as Jesus replied in defense of the prostitute who poured perfume over his feet, the one who is forgiven much loves much. So let us make repentance one of our well-traveled roads to the Father.

With a deep sigh of satisfaction, I admired our day's work in my father's fields. By reorganizing our servants into different teams, we planted the crops and cared for the animals more efficiently than ever before. With farming improvements I implemented, this year's harvest should be more fruitful than ever. Father would be pleased.

As I neared the house late in the afternoon, the aroma of roasted calf met my nose and the sound of music and celebration grew louder in my ears. "What's going on?" I asked one of the servants.

"Your brother has returned safe and sound, and your father has put together a celebration."

"What?! I will not go in there." Anger, jealousy, and resentment raced through my being like a spring thunderstorm on the horizon. Running out to meet me, my father pleaded with me to come in and join the festivities.

Infuriated, I exploded, "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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! This is not right. This is not fair!"

Rather than share in his father's joy, the elder brother wallowed in self-pity, anger, and resentment. Despising the younger brother and his father, this elder son rejected the invitation to come home and join the party. The son's hot-headed retort reveals his performance-based relationship with the father. Taking pride in his loyalty and all he had done for the father, he asked why the fattened calf had never been killed for him and his friends. Faithful, dedicated, compliant, productive – the elder son had demonstrated all these qualities.

And yet...while his younger brother was lost in the far country, the older son was lost at home. The prodigal's sins were blatant, outward, worldly and in-your-face. The elder brother's sins were more inward, hidden, and discreet – jealousy, pride, anger, resentment. Loving his firstborn just as much as the younger son, the father ran out to meet him in the field and assured him, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

Both sons were lost. Both needed to "return home." Both needed the embrace of the father. Both needed to take the same path...repentance

Jesus' audience for this parable included tax collectors, "sinners," Pharisees, and teachers of the law. The latter two groups muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Sharing the Parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son, Jesus illustrates how all of heaven rejoices when one sinner repents. The parallels between the lost sheep, the lost

coin, and the prodigal son who wastes his life in sin are obvious. Heaven loves when the sinner repents. The third parable, however, comes with a twist.

Knowing the hearts of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus adds another element to this last parable...a prideful, resentful, angry elder brother. Clearly the elder brother represented them. Lost while at home, they were proud of their faithful, performance-based loyalty to God. They sacrificially slaved for the Father, doing his work. That “sinners” should so easily gain access to the Father offended them. Like the elder son, their own relationships with the Father had grown cold, based on little more than busyness and works.

While we may not identify much with the prodigal son in this parable, to what extent do we identify with the elder brother? Has our relationship with the Father grown cold as we have become increasingly more performance-oriented, faithfully doing the Lord’s work? Are we outwardly racing around while dying on the inside? Are we lost while at home? What will it take for us to return home to the Father’s embrace?

The road is the same: repentance. When the sins we fight are no longer outward and blatant, we tend to forget to let the Holy Spirit continue his work in our hearts. Our focus turns towards everyone else and judging them. Or what if we have been generally “good” all our lives, never really doing anything bad? Perhaps we accepted Christ without much repentance because “we weren’t that bad.” Instead, we became followers of Christ as compliant firstborns who do it because it’s the right thing to do and we want to please our parents.

Jesus stated, “He who has been forgiven much loves much. He who has been forgiven little loves little.” Without traveling the road of true repentance, we cannot fully appreciate the forgiveness and unconditional love that come with the Father’s embrace. The more we allow God’s Spirit to convict our hearts and the more we respond with heartfelt repentance, the deeper our love for the Father will grow. Additionally, our understanding of His love for us will expand. Thus, the road of true repentance is one way to return to the Father, our first love, with all our hearts.

Interestingly, this parable is left open-ended. Jesus never describes the elder son’s ultimate response, just his initial response. Did he remain lost while at home? Or did he return home with the father upon learning that his father’s love was unconditional? What will your response be to the Father’s invitation? The road of repentance ... the road of pride...?

*From Luke 15. Ideas derived from *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen.