

Luke 15:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he said, A certain man had two sons:

Analysis

A certain man had two sons. This simple opening to the parable of the prodigal son establishes the family context that drives the entire narrative. The "certain man" represents God the Father, whose character is revealed through his treatment of both sons. The "two sons" represent two fundamentally different approaches to relationship with God—one openly rebellious, the other outwardly compliant but inwardly resentful.

The parable structure follows the classic pattern of Jesus' teaching stories: a realistic scenario that suddenly takes an unexpected turn, challenging conventional wisdom and revealing kingdom values. The father's response to both sons defies cultural expectations and reveals the radical nature of divine grace.

This introduction sets up the central tension of the parable: how divine love responds to both flagrant sin and self-righteous legalism. Both sons are alienated from the father despite their different behaviors, suggesting that external conformity without heart transformation is as problematic as open rebellion.

Historical Context

The parable was told in response to Pharisees and scribes criticizing Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2). In first-century Jewish culture, table fellowship implied acceptance and approval, making Jesus' behavior scandalous to religious leaders who maintained strict separation from the ceremonially unclean.

The family dynamics described would have been familiar to Jesus' audience. Younger sons typically received one-third of the inheritance, while the eldest received a double portion. Requesting inheritance while the father lived was culturally unthinkable—equivalent to wishing the father dead. The father's granting this request would have shocked listeners.

The parable addresses the fundamental Jewish struggle with Gentile inclusion in God's kingdom. The religious leaders (represented by the elder son) resented God's acceptance of sinners without requiring full proselyte conversion and law observance.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How do both sons in the parable represent different forms of alienation from the father, and what does this teach about human relationship with God?
2. What does the father's character in this parable reveal about God's nature that challenges both legalistic and antinomian approaches to faith?
3. How should this parable shape Christian attitudes toward both open sinners and self-righteous religious people?

Interlinear Text

Εἶπεν	δέ	Ἄνθρωπος	τις	εἶχεν	δύο	υἱούς
he said	And	man	A certain	had	two	sons
G2036	G1161	G444	G5100	G2192	G1417	G5207

