

Through verse 10 the righteous and the sinners have been represented by animals and coins

Now people appear

In the last two parables—Jesus likened the Pharisees to a bad shepherd and a careless woman

This time there is no reference to a character being like the Pharisees

People... 3 main characters are mentioned twice in the opening scene of this story

1. Father
2. Older son
3. Younger son

Opening speech is given by the youngest member of the family—surprising in itself

But the speech itself is shocking—he asks for his inheritance now!

In Middle Eastern culture,

To ask for the inheritance while the father is alive is to wish him dead

It also infers that the son is already dead to the family

A traditional Middle Eastern father can only respond one way—

He is expected to refuse and drive the son away, chastising him for his request

May even physically run him out of the house

For us, this doesn't seem like as outlandish a request as it would have to people in Jesus' day

While not a nice thing to do, we can imagine such a request—and even the father's response

We would call the son arrogant and rude and the father an enabler

But we can imagine it

But in the Middle East—such a request is illegitimate and absolutely unthinkable

He is requesting immediate possession of what would normally be his only at his father's death

This is a watershed case with no parallels in Middle Eastern literature

Such a request in a story would have created a deep sense of shock among the people

There is no law or custom among Jews or Arabs

Which entitles the son to his inheritance while his father is still alive

The only reasonable response is for the father to explode with anger and refuse!

When death is imminent—then and only then is it time to distribute the inheritance

Babylonian Talmud warns against distributing wealth while the father is still alive

But there is nothing in the law or writings about a son requesting the inheritance

It is beyond possibility so why would you write about it or create a law

But in Jesus' parable—that is the request of the younger son

The fact that the father grants the request makes it clear that the character of the father in the parable

Is not modeled after a traditional Middle Eastern patriarch

The shepherd and the woman in the previous parables do nothing out of the ordinary

But the actions of the father are unique and amazing

Divine actions which would never be done by any earthly father

The father in this parable is God

Father in reference to God...

The Old Testament uses the word father in reference to God

This tradition uses the word father to describe God

Jesus alone addressed God with the title Abba—Father

But in this parable Jesus tells us what he means when he calls God, Father

This is Jesus' defining parable spelling out who this Father God is and how he acts

The west defines things with concepts—Jesus defines the term father in a story

We have also assumed that naming God as father is modeled after a Middle Eastern patriarch

Trap there is accepting the patriarchal model for Christianity

Results in a Christian history that denies rights and freedom to women

The nature of a Middle Eastern father is unimportant except to understand how it differs

Nor is the nature of a Western father relevant except to understand how we model God after it

Rather than modeling the Father in this story after an earthly father of any sort

Jesus is creating a new picture of God—of a Divine Father

Jesus doesn't merely name God "Father" but goes on to define what he means by that

As the story unfolds, the picture of God the father will emerge slowly

But we see it emerging in the opening scene

Rather than strike the boy across the face for his insolence, the father grants the request

The father is able to extend this costly form of grace

because he is willing to endure the agony of rejected love

Probably the most painful form of suffering

The son has rejected the father's love—it is out of this rejection that he asks for his inheritance

The father grants the ultimate form of freedom—namely the freedom to reject the relationship

The younger son receives grace in 3 interrelated ways...

1. The son is given his share of the inheritance
2. The father willingly acts out of love rather than out of pain—although the son doesn't see it
3. The son is free to break his relationship with the family, sell and leave town with the money

This third gift makes clear that the son asks for a second unimaginable privilege

Jewish law of inheritance makes it clear that the son could not sell while the father is alive

The inheritance goes to the son after the father's death

Should the inheritance be assigned before death

The property remains in the hands of the father until he dies

The sons can only dispose of the property AFTER the father dies

If the son sells property before the father dies—it isn't claimed until after death

The father can spend the income and what isn't spent is added to the estate

The only purpose for such actions is if the father's death is imminent

Any discussion of this is initiated by the father—never by the sons

There is no provision for a younger son asking for or receiving an inheritance

No one makes laws for impossible situations

If the son cannot finalize the sale of the property until after the father dies—here is another deviation

The son in Jesus' parable "gathered everything" and went to the far country

A few days later the younger son turned the whole of his share into cash and left home for a distant country. Luke 15:13 New English Bible

The son also manages to pressure his father into allowing him to sell his inheritance

The father is clearly healthy and active—he runs later in the story—so he is not dying

The son would require the father's permission to sell the inheritance and take the money

The inheritance is in land and in livestock and slaves so it has to be sold

Why does the father do this?

Such an action grows out of the father's nature
He is willing to grant ultimate freedom—the freedom to reject the love offered
The father gives the son permission to sell the estate
Hurt and anger are reprocessed into grace

The son would need to sell this inheritance in the surrounding area—which enrages the village
It all happens quickly—"soon afterward" or "a few days later" the son sells and leaves home
The settling of an estate is a slow process—often taking months or years
The fact that the son sells quickly indicates that someone in the community buys it
But the community at large is horrified at this
The son is selling his own soul and insulting his father publicly
Selling such wealth is not done in private
The hostility of the community dictates the son's haste in selling
He apparently leaves quickly without a "qetsatsah" or cutting off ceremony
Such actions of a son would mean that he is cut off from his inheritance
The only way to be restored is to restore the land
If the son goes away, then returns and re-buys the land, all will be forgiven
He must succeed or never return!!

The older son is silent through this interchange, refusing to do his part
He should have been galvanized into action to mediate the relationship
The listener to Jesus would expect the son to take action
His silence announces that the older son has poor relationships with both his brother and father
Instead, the older son accepts his portion of the inheritance with silence!
A fact that would have been noticed in the village

I am particularly struck by the picture of the father as one who acts with grace to grant freedom
The father does the unthinkable and lets the son go—knowing that it won't be good

To know that our heavenly father will let us go when we are determined to do so is amazing
The kind of love that both releases us and waits with us, frees us in ways we can't imagine
We often quote a saying about love that sets the object of the love free

Some of you have had this experience of letting a loved one go—at great personal cost
Not having any children and being from a family that is together and close—I have not
But I have had the experience of watching people I love make poor choices
Recognizing that I have done so as well and God has graced me—so I grace them
Also of watching people I love move away from faith—letting them go while still praying
A defining experience has shaped my ministry—first wedding I did for a couple
Woman went to her youth pastor to be married, but he denied as man was not Christian
He burned the bridges for her to come back to him when she needed him most

I never want to burn bridges back to God! I always want to leave the way open!

[Source material for the Biblical Study: Bailey, Kenneth E. (1992). *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.]