I think this parable is mistitled. It's typically referred to as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” However, there are 2 sons in the story. You miss the radical message that Jesus is giving by focusing only on one. The primary reason it's told is to confront the elder brother who I think represents the Pharisees and Scribes. (so MacArthur, et al)

One writer calls this parable “a Father and his two very different sons.” How many of you have two sons, or have one brother? It's amazing how different two boys under one roof can be!
- Now mine are from two different countries...
- I always preview my sermons before Sunday (early service!), and so I asked them: How are James and Joshua different?
  - height, color, age, grade ...
  - "I have the hand gift and he has the mouth gift."
  - One likes to wrestle ("I must break you"), one likes to sing (fortunately he doesn't take after papa). One loves to talk, one work alone.
  - One loves vegetables. The other is forced to eat them! The kid from Africa!

Then I asked, "How are they similar?" Angela responds, "Both need the gospel." That's what this is story is about:

A father with two different sons, with one great need: the gospel. That's what this parable is teaching.

It's amazing how much theology is packed into this story! God, man, sin, Christ, grace, repentance, heaven, kingdom: All here!

J.C. Ryle calls this parable the "most full and instructive of the parables." He added, "There is probably no chapter in the Bible that has done greater good to the souls of men." Barclay, "the greatest short story in the world." Warfield, "a gem of story-telling, which must be pronounced nothing less than artistically perfect."

This parable is especially important as we deal with the problem of moralism. The elder brother represents the moralist.
Moralism is "the idea that you can merit eternal life by your good works and moral efforts."

Christian Smith speaks of "Moralistic, therapeutic, deism" which is the idea that (a generic, uninvolved-in-your-life) God wants you to be nice, and good, and if you are, then you will go to heaven when you die. It's everywhere, he says. Moralism is not gospel.

But this story covers more than the moralist (elder bro, Pharisees), it also covers the hedonist, a pleasure seeker (younger bro, group 2). It describes human nature vividly.

It also gives the story of the Bible: Come back to God. Creation (your family tree goes back to God), Alienation, Reconciliation, Restoration (kingdom feast).

Let's divide our study in three parts: (1) the audience, and (2) the parable, and (3) the radical message.

#1: THE AUDIENCE: (15:1-2)

Jesus always gives his parables in a context. Here he is speaking to two groups of people: sinners and tax collectors and Scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus eating with sinners. This was distasteful to the religious leaders. (cf., 14:1-24).

- "Eating you way through Luke's gospel" (Karris)... At a meal...
- If we don't evangelize, we will fossilize... Keep it up! We learn in this story what to say as we interact people.  
- This is what the kingdom is like... Previews of the kingdom...

Jesus is repeatedly with these two groups (cf., Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50). One group: Rebellious. Another group: Religious. In Luke 19, the religious are offended at Jesus' grace.

The story of the two sons has these two audiences in view. The elder brother needs more than an attitude adjustment. He needs new life, like his younger brother experiences.
The elder brother is lost in his *self-righteousness* and his perceived "goodness and morality."

So then, there are two ways to be alienated from God.  
**One: Be lost in irreligion; Two: Be lost in religion.**  
*These are the two thieves of the gospel.*

This parable is supposed to cause us to **compare and contrast** these two brothers. We should also **participate in the drama** (like active theatre) by asking, "**Which one are we like?**"

Let me lay out what I think are some (hopefully) fair descriptions of each. These aren’t perfect; I call them “tendencies.” **Who are you?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Younger Brother Tendencies</th>
<th>Elder Brother Tendencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irreligious</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovators - progressives</td>
<td>Traditionalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Conformists</td>
<td>Conformists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule Breakers</td>
<td>Rule Keepers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immoralists</td>
<td>Moralists</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Chill&quot;</td>
<td>Angry - critical, no solutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work &quot;When Inspired&quot;</td>
<td>Hard Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visible Sinners - Facebook</td>
<td>Invisible Sinners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses People</td>
<td>Condemns People</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unrighteous</td>
<td>Self-Righteous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jesus uses this parable to say; "You're both in trouble."  
We see this crucial truth in this famous parable:

**There are three ways to live, not two!**  
(Or to say it another way)  
"There are two ways to run from God, and only one way home."

Many want to divide the world into "bad" guys, and "good" guys. But Jesus says no. There are three ways. Bad guys, those who think they're good (and in no need of repentant) and those who repent and have life.

• You can live like a hedonists. (Sinners and tax collectors)
• You can live like a moralists. (Scribes and Pharisees)
• You can live like a new creation united with Christ Jesus.

Christianity is about the dead coming to life, as parable teaches. Christianity isn't a list of rules, or just another book on a shelf (philosophy); it's more like an explosion. It's not intellectual assent nor moral conformity (not initially). It's called the new birth.

C.S. Lewis pointed this out in his article, "Three Kinds of Men." He says the third is exemplified in Paul's words "to live is Christ and to die is gain." This person is person is consumed with Christ; they are united with Christ. Lewis says this person "wants Christ." Their affections have been changed. The religious person compartmentalizes his life. The true believer says, "Christ is my life." (Col 3)

The early Romans recognized this. It's hard for some people to believe but when Christianity first arose, no one called it "a religion."

• The Romans called Christians "atheists" because of what they were saying about God had not been said before. They had no temple, no priests, and no sacrifices. Why? Because Jesus ended them all. The Romans rightly labeled Christianity something else.

A lot of people don't recognize these three ways. People you talk to don't have a third category. They have religion and irreligion.

Keller says that the 99% of people who reject Christianity aren't rejecting Christianity; they're rejecting moral conformity/resolve.

Others come to Christ later after realizing as a youth they weren't made alive, they were assenting to a list of rules. How many of you
know someone who said, "I said I was a Christian but it wasn't until later that I actually understood the gospel and was saved." Some call these people "inactive church members." I think they are "Lost." They have an appearance of godliness, but not life.

Interestingly, most people in the gospels who respond to Jesus were more often the younger brother types, than the religious moralists (See Luke 7, John 3-4, Luke 19).

"Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will come into the kingdom of God before you." 


Imagine if are outreach reflected this reality? What would our lives look like? Are younger brother types more attracted to you than elder brother types - like Jesus?

Why is this? I think we could think of many reasons, but when it comes down to it they are all bi-products of this fundamental problem: pride.

Only the humbly repentant will enter the kingdom.

This is consistent with the teaching of the NT: Repentance and Faith.

But the religious moralist is often blinded to his need. He is self-righteous and arrogant and blind. The moralist is often unable to pray like the tax collector "Lord be merciful to me a sinner." He prays instead like the Pharisee, "I'm glad I'm not like that guy," (Luke 18:9-14) - verse 14-humility.

Some Observations About Moralism

It's global.

- It’s in the Religious South. Straighten up and fly right. Justification by not drinking beer or chasing women.
- It’s in world religions. Every other religion is based on a works-righteousness system, not Christianity. It’s about Done, not Do.

It's natural.
• We are by nature moralists. We have a moral law within. That’s a good thing. It becomes bad when you begin to think that your morality is meriting eternal life by obeying rules.
• Morality can keep you out of jail, but not hell. It’s perfectly fine and good to have moral law to govern society, **it just won’t do squat for salvation.** Why? Because God is too holy and sin is too awful for a person not to need the grace of Jesus.

**It's prideful.**
• It creates a superiority in the heart. It creates a caste system.
• Moralism, or religious legalism got Jesus crucified.
• Moralism is at the heart of racism.

**It's hypocritical.**
• **The irony of moralism is that a moralist can't keep his own standards.** He sets standards to merit eternal life, but he can't meet them.
• Remember the Good Samaritan story? Jesus says, "Do it."

**It's parental.**
• We train our kids like this. We give them **behavior modification.**
• We try to legislate morality.
• Again, it's not all bad. We certainly shouldn't advocate immorality.
• **The problem is not with what they're getting, but with what they're not getting; namely, the grace of Jesus in the gospel.**
• **Behavior modification saves no one.**
• So your kids can "fly right," but still "fly right to hell."
• Normally, what happens when kids don't hear grace, and they just hear this kind of parental teaching, is serious rebellion.
• **The law can point out sin, but it cannot change hearts; that's the job of the gospel.**

**What Should I Do About Moralism?**

**We must tell people how to come home. Third way.**

• For the sake of the moralist – They must not trust in their goodness or moral efforts, but in Christ and Christ alone.
• For the sake of the hedonist. – They need to realize that we are not inviting them to become moralists, but followers of Jesus Christ.

The third way is **“union with Christ.”**
• The third way trusts in the work of another; he trusts in the imputed work of Jesus; dressed in his robe.
• The third way has new affections! They say like Paul, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.”
• Leads to conformity to Christ by the Spirit, not conformity to not human traditions (Col 2:23) "no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh"

Do you remember Paul's former life? He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. If anyone could have made it by the law, by morality, it was Paul. But he he counted as “dung” compared to the imputed righteousness of Jesus.

Don't trust in your dung for eternal life.
Trust in "it is done" for eternal life. (Phil. 3:8-9)
Not man-centered religion, but Christ-imputed righteousness.

The New Testament addresses these two groups of people regularly, but most of the preaching I hear coddles the moralists. They don't offend them. And they rail on the hedonists (gay community, Las Vegas, Bourbon Street), for acting like sinners. Where are the preachers who will say "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees?"

Let's play a game, Hedonist or Moralist?
Cretans  Circumcision Party (not my idea of a party)
Corinthians  Galatians
Woman at Well  Nicodemus
Rich Man (Lazarus)  Rich Young Ruler
Woman in Adultery  Pharisees
Barbarians  Self-made religion

Who did Paul and Jesus reserved their harshest words for? The religious moralists. Remember Matthew 23, “Woe to you!” And Paul to the Galatians, “Let him be anathema.” (Galatians 1).

#2: THE PARABLE (11-32)

Scene 1: The Younger Brother (11-24)

This story is a picture of repentance. We see Rebellion, Return, Reconciliation, Rejoicing in the younger, then a lack of repentance in the elder. He has a different type of rebellion, but doesn't return...
• You need to do what the younger brother does. Are you running from God? Return. Why? So you can be reconciled to him.

A. His Rebellion (12-16)

11-12 – His Departure
• The younger brother essentially says that he doesn’t want has father; just his stuff. This was a massive offense in Jewish culture. The father gives it to him.
• The word for property is the word "bios." The son is essentially asking the father to tear his life apart.
• He is saying, "I wish you were dead."
• 1/3 of the property went to the younger, and 2/3 with the elder.
• This is picture of what we did with God.

13 – His Depravity
• I ran away once. "Don't be exposing me!" I'm not a side show! But this is much more serious.
• Modern day – strip clubs, buying drinks for everyone; Vegas, NO, Manhattan – or College.
• He thinks he will be more happy apart from the father.
• That's the human struggle: Can man be happy apart from God? (Sartre). For a season and at some level. But not ultimately. All men seek happiness - Pascal

13c-15 – He’s Desperate
• He spends everything. Then, the economy has tanked.
• He can’t find work. He is willing to work with pigs, and eat with them.
• He looks like a mess. He needs rehab. He needs to take an AIDS test.

16 – He’s Isolated
• He has no money, but worse, no friends.
• He probably had lots when he was buying drinks, but as Eric Clapton, "No one knows you when you're down and out."

How many of you know some younger brothers? That was me… They went headlong into the world of "self-expression," open rebellion, hedonistic fantasies, or “alternative lifestyles?"
Picture of Rebellion

• **Hungry** - Man can’t live by bread alone. What happens when the weekend is over? "Everybody's working for the weekend." What happens when the economy tanks?

• **Enslaved** - You think you’re free, but you are a slave to your passions (Titus 3). Sin's Ability to interest and satisfy a person quickly runs out
  
  • **Drugs** – Pot, to Meth, to Cocaine – this is higher, this is higher – in the grip of enslavement
  
  • **Pornography** – Before long, there's not a picture he can look at that means a thing to him.
  
  • **Liar** – He can never get to the end of his lies
  
  • **Proud** – Can never get to the end of his pride

• **Alienation** - he has no real friends. You are made for community, and you won't find it outside of Christ and his church.
  
  • Sin alienates you from God and people.

Here's the question: Is there any hope for his young man? If so, is it about him cleaning himself up and then coming to God?

Yes, there’s hope, but it’s not about straightening up, and flying right. It's about coming home to Jesus, falling on your knees crying for mercy; and let him clean you up.

B. **His Return** (17-19)

17 –Awakening.

• He “came to himself.” He's awakened.

• Most of us probably wouldn't say that it was in a pig sty that your life was changed; but it happened here. Have you been awakened to your need?

• Everyone wants to “find themselves" these days. **Chris is college.**

• To find yourself, you deny yourself and come to Jesus, and there you find your true self.

18 –Repentance
• "I will go to my father." That's repentance. Turning back to God.
• "I have sinned." He doesn't say, "It wasn't my context" "the devil made me do it." Like Psalm 51, "Against you and you only have I sinned."

19 – Humility
• "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as a hired servant."
• He is putting his plan together. If you've ever rebelled, you have to make up your story - flat tire, aliens, midgets... "See what had happened was..."
• This is actually a good plan. It's humble. It's repentant.
• He is offering himself to be a "slave." He was going to try to gain some standing by making restitution.

C. His Reconciliation w the Father (20-23)

20 – The Love of the Father. Notice the actions.
His plan doesn't work. The Father comes out to him!

This love is unique. This love is scandalous.

"He saw him"
• How did he see him? He was looking for him. It's elementary dear Watson. We can imagine that the Father would look down the road, and would see dust, and hope it was his son, but it is someone else. He's watching.

"He felt compassion" – I think of Psalm 103:13, and this:
How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure

"He ran"
• Women, children, not men. "He look, it's Levi. Where's he running? He's running like a man who's trying to stay warm."
• He was probably also deflecting punishment. This boy shamed the entire village and family.

"He embraced him" – He didn't wait for him to take a bath.
  • Not – "if you love me like this, then I'll love you like that." Stay up to snuff if you are going to be loved. This is the apex of hugging. He didn't earn the hug.
  • Gospel - not obey, and receive the hug, but you are hugged, now obey out of love.

"He kissed him" – It says technically that he "covers him with kisses." A sign of forgiveness (R&R, cf., 2Sam 14:33)

  • Some dads need to be more affectionate. Don't run in their dugout, but a kiss on the head; that's a good thing.

21 – The Father never responds to the Son, he just reconciles with him!

   How awesome is it that when the prodigal returned, the Father didn't throw a fit, but he threw a party.

May the prospect of mercy lead you home.

22 - Best Robe - Honor. Every nobleman had a robe... expensive, ornate, embroidered, one of a kind – of the highest quality. Same word - angels (Mark 16:6), glorified believers (Rev 6:11). Picture of gospel.
  • Ring – Dignity - Membership in Family
  • Shoes – Sonship. Now, slaves customarily went barefoot. Only masters and their sons wore sandals. This was no small thing to those listening. The Father didn't make him like a hired servant, he made him his son.

23- Fattened Calf – Delicacy that was usually reserved for major occasions, like day of atonement. The whole community would come out. It was prepared for special occasions. I love that Jesus eats with sinners, and that Jesus mentions meat. He didn't say, oh let's celebrate; let's have a spinach salad.
You could call the father the "Prodigal father" since the word can mean "lavish," in addition to the word "reckless." He has lavished grace on reckless sinners like us.

This is your greatest need, to be reconciled to God. Do you really want to turn your back on this God?

D. Rejoicing (24)
   • Let's celebrate because my dead son is alive.
   • Celebration – Luke 15:7, 15:10

Scene 2: The Elder Brother (25-32)

Compare the Younger Brother: There is Rebellion, But No Return, No Reconciliation, and No Rejoicing.

25 – He hears music and dancing! That will set any legalist off. They aren't dancing with a lampshade on their head; they're genuinely happy.

Grace makes you glad; legalism makes you mad. That's why legalists/moralists have few friends.

   "When Barnabas saw the grace of God, he was glad."

The essential response from the brother was, "How dare you?"

26-27 – He hears the news. He should be in the party.

   It is possible to be around the church your whole life and not enter the party.

28 – The Father loves the elder brother as well. He entreats him to come in.
   • He refuses! That's like Luke 14, the Great Invitation.
   • "Angry" – "explosive rage"

29 – He insults his father, "Look." He doesn't even call him father.
• His theology is a **theology of works, of payback.**
• "**You owe me**" theology.
• He has a boss not a father.
• "**These many years I served you**" - slave relationship
• "**I never disobeyed a command**" – He is keeping score, trying to earn favor. He has been slaving, now he smells meat!
  o He's his own Savior. **When you make yourself the hero**, not Christ, your story becomes a **tragedy**.
• "**I never got a young goat**" – how self-centered, a self-righteous. Your own brother was a total train wreck; you should be celebrating, instead you are whining.

Those who have been changed by the gospel **see serving the Father differently:**
• It's a privilege
• It's a joy
• They serve out of loving gratitude
• Only this service glorifies God.

Our reward is in heaven; we aren't looking for material wealth or human praise.

30 – More self-righteousness
• "**This son of yours**" – condescension, another trait of the moralist.
• "**He devoured property**"
• "**He has been with prostitutes**" –

  He's repeating Luke 15:2!
  “This man eats with sinners.”

• He is actually angry at the Father's kindness.
• He's like Jonah!

31 – The Father responds
• All is provided for you; **come on in the party.** All of the inheritance is yours, now come into the party!

32 – It is fitting to celebrate! Death to life! Let's dance.
• "joy in heaven!" why joy? Sin is awful and grace is amazing! Those who don't celebrate puzzle me!
• When people come into the kingdom, we should celebrate.
• The Father celebrates!
• Ain't no party like the Jesus party...
• We should spend time with the tax collectors and sinners, like Jesus, so that we may do so.

We are left with the question, "Will the elder brother go in?" We don't know. It's a cliffhanger.

Will he embrace Isaiah 53, "we all like sheep have gone astray" or will he think he is superior and not in need to true repentance.
• “[self-righteous people have] no need of repentance” (15:7)
• “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (5:32)

#3: THE RADICAL MESSAGE

In it, Jesus clarifies three major issues: God, Sin, and Salvation.

#1: God. See God as Father

Jesus presents God as Father. That is unique to people. God isn’t a life-guard, who is distant and only comes in to help when you’re desperate. God isn’t a butler either. He's not just for you to call him up for a fluffy pillow to give you all of your desires. God is father.

• Early church in articulating Apostles Creed decided on Father first instead of Creator because he has never not been father
• God is “father to fatherless.”
• Over half of the children in the world will go to bed without a father.
• Jesus paints a picture of God as father, unlike any father – he was affectionate, he received the sinner.
• If you have had a distant father, no father, or an abusive father, I want to say I am so sorry. And I also want to say: Come to this one.
Though God is majestic, transcendent and holy, he is also loving, forgiving, and near. We cry "Abba."

#2: Sin. Understand that Sin is Deeper than Visible Sins

No one knew human nature like Jesus. "He knew what was in their hearts" (John 2).

The gospel is as offensive, if not more offensive to moralist as hedonists.

The usual view of sin is the prodigal. There's no question that his recklessness is sin. The older brother is lost in his "goodness." "He is good in the worst sense of the word" (Twain"

Moralist: You need to repent of yours self-righteousness and the pride underneath your moral conformity. Pride is the worst of all sins; it puts you at the front of the line.

You need to realize that God is more holy than you think, and your sin is worse than you think. That's why you're desperate for mercy.

You are worse than you've ever dreamed, but you are more loved than you ever dared to hope.

You must repent of your goodness, not just your badness.

Lay your deadly doing down
Down at Jesus' feet
Stand in him and him alone
Gloriously Complete

#3: Salvation. Experience Salvation by God's Initiating Love, True Repentance, and Someone Else’s Payment

A. We need the initiating love of the Father
   • He goes out to both sons. Did you notice that (20, 28)
   • He kisses the younger brother before he repents. It's his kindness that leads us to repentance.
   • He also goes out to the elder brother.
B. We must truly repent.
   • We must see the pervasive nature of sin. That even our good deeds are filthy rags.
   • The younger brother repents of his sins.
   • The elder brother thinks he has nothing to repent of!
   • You may have your cuffs starched, with your initials, but on your best day, you are just a dressed up sinner. We come into the kingdom as beggers.
   • Ryken: The elder brother is “Stingy, self-pitying, resentful, proud, bitter, unrepentant, unforgiving, and unwilling to show grace to others. The only thing he knew to celebrate was his own accomplishments.”

C. We need to be melted and moved by what it cost to bring us home.

In the two parables that precede this one, the story is about someone looking for something that is lost. Do you see that? (Notice it’s a lady looking! That’s a successful example)

In this one, no one goes looking for the younger brother.

Ed Clowney tells a story of a younger brother who was missing during the Vietnam War. After getting nowhere through the official channels, the older brother left his home and entered the jungles himself. They referred to him as "the brother."

In the beginning of the story there's no mention of the elder brother seeking his younger brother. (15:12-ff).

Ryken says, "The elder brother does not fulfill his sacred responsibility to reconcile his family."

   • That's because the elder brother is a Pharisee.
   • The elder brother was “not his brother’s keeper.”
   • The elder brother should have said this from the beginning. "I’ll go look for him; I will give my inheritance, lay down my life for him."

Some have said that this parable teaches forgiveness without cost. Well, it's is hard to say everything in one story! But someone does
pay. The elder brother pays! Everything was his! But he has a resentful heart. He is a pathetic elder brother.

The good news is that we have the better elder brother. "He rejoices [not ashamed] to call us brother." (Heb 2:11)

For God so loved the world that he didn't send a Pharisee, he sent Jesus. He came for us, he paid the ultimate price, he rescued us.

We have a true elder brother, who left heaven itself to rescue us from the pit of sin, now there's no condemnation, only everlasting joy to all who will repent and come home.

We have the true elder brother, who gave it all that we might come into the father's love.

• Jesus was stripped naked of his robe and his dignity; so that we could be dressed in his robe and have his dignity.
• Jesus drank the cup of suffering that we may drink the cup of joy.
• Now we feast on his grace.

And Christians are melted and moved by his gospel truth.

Now as once rebellious sinners isolated from God, have been reconciled to the Father, we want to serve our Father. Like Newton says:

\[
\text{Our pleasure and our duty,} \\
\text{though opposite before} \\
\text{since we have seen his beauty} \\
\text{are joined to part no more.}
\]

Let's spread the gospel of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the sake of the younger and elder brothers in our congregations, and when they repent, let's party.

Do you know this God? Will you come home?

The angels rejoice at this gospel.
Peter says, "The angels long to look into this gospel!" (12). They never say, "Oh, I know that." There's always more understanding, and more application needed. So do people long to behold it. Make it central in your ministry.

Turn your people into angels by continuing to point them into the bottomless depths of the gospel.