

Letters to a Lost Son

In the name of him who makes all things new, dear friends in Christ: Today's sermon message is a little different. It takes the form of an exchange of letters between two people. And with that brief introduction, I trust that the rest will be self-explanatory. So sit back and use your imagination a bit to try to picture the two persons involved while I share with you a message I've entitled *Letters to a Lost Son*.

My dearly loved son, [Gentle, paternal, with genuine concern]

I cannot find the words to express the emptiness my heart feels on account of your continued absence. Though it has now been over three years since your departure, never a moment passes that I am not painfully aware that you are not here where you belong. Ten—no, more like a hundred times a day I catch something out of the corner of my eye and I stop and turn and look to see if maybe, just maybe, it might be you. It is with the same fervent hope that I find myself often staring at the horizon or looking down the road you took when you left, praying to God and willing you with all my spirit's strength to return. With each disappointment I feel the pain and heartache of your leaving all over again. Oh how I wish that you give up this folly. Bring joy to this old man's few remaining years and come home. At very least have the kindness to reply to my letters. Your angry silence is more than I can bear. Let me know at least that you are well and that you want for nothing. But I am certain that if we could just communicate, if we could just talk to one another, we could work this out. Everything will be like it was – or even better. Please, son, respond – or better yet, come home.

[signed] Your grieving father

Dear "father", [Hostile, sneering with contempt]

Got your last letter. I don't know what made me open it instead of throw it out and burn it with all the others you've sent. Maybe I thought if I responded to one you'd finally get it through your stubborn, thick head that we're through. I don't need you and I don't want you to be part of my life. Just leave me alone. If it'll help get you to stop pestering me, I'll let you know that I'm fine. I've got a good job. And I've got plenty of friends – friends who actually understand and care about me. They treat me right; something you never did. So this should satisfy you: I've got everything I need and I really am quite happy right here where I am. So get over it. *I am never coming home.*

[signed] A free and happy man

My dearly loved son,

We were thrilled to receive your letter. Your brother and I wept with tears of pure joy to have our long held fears concerning your welfare put to some ease. Thank you; you have given us such relief. Though the resentment evident in your words is painful to read, I would rather hear curses from you than nothing at all. It means at least that we are communicating – and if we're doing that there is still hope. If it were possible, hearing from you now – even in this way – has made us long to see you again all the more. Please reconsider: if I have wronged you in any way or if there is anything I can do

to put an end to this sad separation, I am sure that if you just come home we can set things right again. You will see; I know of it. Just come home.

[signed] Your ever hopeful father

Dear "father",

I should have known how foolish it would be to write you to tell you to give it up once and for all. You just don't get it, do you? Fine. Now that I've made the mistake of starting, I'm going to finish this. But I hardly know where to begin. I am absolutely dumbfounded that you had the audacity to mention your *other son* to me and then ask with all apparent innocence if you had wronged me in some way. What a joke! Can you be so obtuse? I don't even know why you keep writing. You ought to be happy now: you've got the son you love the most and no one else to compete for your attention. You don't even have to pretend that you care about me anymore. That should be easy for you. You always favored him. It seemed that he could never do anything wrong. But you were always riding me, nit-picking this and that, never satisfied with even my best efforts. I used to try so hard to please you ... and for what? Well, I'm done with it. I don't need you or your suffocating guidance. You can't hurt me anymore. I'm free and you can't touch me. Just leave me alone.

[the letter is not signed]

Oh my dearly loved son,

How bitter and angry you are; and also how confused and mistaken. You are absolutely right that I treated you differently than your brother. I had to. You two have very different temperaments, very distinct personalities – there's no way I could have treated you exactly the same and be the kind of father you both needed. But you are so wrong to imagine even for a moment that I love you less. Your brother takes after your mother. He's more sensitive and tenderhearted; and yes, there's a streak of something wild there. If I had used a firm hand on him it would have broken him and driven him away for good. But you, you're more like me. Strong willed. Independent. You needed the discipline. You needed the bar set high so that you could achieve your best. And for a long time you did; you made me practically burst with a father's pride. I'm sorry that you do not understand this. Maybe someday you will learn when you have children of your own. There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to parenting. Yes, I treated you differently; but never, never have I loved you less – and I still love you now with my whole heart.

And I remain deeply concerned about you – especially now that we have heard that things are growing increasingly difficult where you are. There are reports of an extended drought and possibly some crop failures. Have you been affected in any way? Let us know that you are well as our worries for you grow daily. And again, I implore you to come home. Things are well here and we have plenty. Do not let your resentment and your stubborn pride cause you to suffer or keep you from the happy reunion we might share.

[signed] Your father who always loves and cares for you

Dear "father",

How touching. That last letter of yours really got me all choked up and misty eyed, what with your “deep concern” for me and all. Well, don’t you worry about me. I can take care of myself. Yes, it will probably delight you to hear that I’ve recently lost my job on account of certain cut backs; but I’m looking for work and I’d say my prospects are pretty good. Like I said, I have lots of good, reliable friends – so don’t count on me coming crawling home like a beggar to you anytime soon.

That’s because you’re right: I’m not like my brother. It’s funny that you say he’s more like mom since it’s mostly his fault that she’s gone now. When he took off on that wanton binge of drinking and whoring and God only knows what other vices he got himself into, it destroyed her. I’m sure that it was her broken heart that led her to her early grave. And you’re the one who let him go. You just let him practically spit in your face and gave him his share of the inheritance – and you did it knowing that he was only going to throw it all away. What kind of a father does that? Oh, yes, I know; you’d say, “One who loves his son”. Yeah? Well, I’m not buying it. If you had loved him, you would never have let him go. And if you had loved me, you would never have taken him back—at least, not like you did. Where was all that discipline you talk about—the stuff you heaped so freely on me? That’s what he needed. You should have made him sleep with the livestock and eat what was left over from the servants’ tables. You should have made him work off on half wages the small fortune he wasted. Then he might have learned something. But no. Not you. It’s “Kill the fatted calf and let’s celebrate. My worthless son has come back to mooch off me some more.” You even gave him back the family signet ring as if to say he could do it all over again. That’s just irresponsible. The whole thing makes me sick. And like I said, I’m free of it now. I don’t understand you. I never will. And I will never come home.

[again, no signature]

My dearly loved son,

At last we get to the core of your complaint. And it’s true: you do not understand. For you it is all “by the book”. Everything must be just so: every “i” dotted and every “t” crossed. For you justice means “sameness”; and it is absolute, unbending, unyielding. But you do not understand. Such a sense of justice is a cruel mistress – an idol goddess that can never be satisfied. She tempts you with the notion that you might be able to please her; but you never can. She always demands more than you can deliver, and in the end she demands your life and she takes it.

What you do not understand is that justice must be tempered with mercy, fairness must take need into account and be distributed with wisdom, weakness and failure must be attended by compassion, and offense must be met with forgiveness. This is what it means to love: not that we demand of each other a perfection that cannot be obtained; but that we forgive, uphold, and care for each other despite our many failures, mistakes, and weaknesses.

In this way I have always loved you. You condemn your brother for wasting a part of the family fortune; do you mean to say that you have never squandered some of it on yourself? Do you imagine that because I never confronted you that I didn’t know? You condemn him for sexual sins; do you mean to say that you have kept yourself completely pure in your thoughts and actions? You blame him for having a part in your mother’s death, and yet you harbor murderous thoughts of hatred and

revenge in your own heart. By your own standards you deserve to be cast out to live with the livestock.

Your brother had to learn through his own foolish mistakes that the path he chose was wrong. Though he had been told, it was a truth he needed to discover for himself. And it was a painful lesson for him – far more painful than any of the discipline I ever applied to you. But he has learned the lesson. And by God's grace he has been restored to me; how could I not receive him back as the beloved son he is? With all my heart I await the day when I can receive you again in exactly the same way. Come home, son. I have heard that the situation where you are grows worse every day. There's no need for you to endure it a moment longer. Come home; I beg you.

[signed] Your very concerned father.

Dear "Sir",

So that's it, huh? First you say how different we are, and now you say that my brother and I are just as guilty. How dare you make that comparison. I am ten times the man he will ever be. And no thanks: I do not want your charity and I do not need your forgiveness. I am not my brother. I will never forget what he did to our family, and I will never forgive him for it. And I will never forgive you for letting him get away with it. So let this be an end to it. I need to get back to work: the hogs need to be fed. I am no longer your son, and you are not my father.

My dearly loved son,

You may think it possible to sever our bonds of kinship with a few strokes of your pen; but I assure you that it is not done so easily. As long as I have life and breath I will love you with a father's love, and I will search the horizon hoping to see you return. Once I was blessed with two sons. One died to me – I thought I'd lost him; but he came back to life. Now I have lost the other; and I know that the God who raised the one from the dead can also bring me back the other alive and well. So every day I pray that our God and Father will melt your hard heart and open your eyes to see your own need for forgiveness and compassion that you might learn that others need it too. Mercy is better than sacrifice. And love endures forever. Come home, son. I have a robe, a ring, a fatted calf, and a father's embrace I want to give you.

[signed] Your father who always loves and cares for you

I have here no response to this last letter from the father to his lost son – except perhaps for the one that you might wish to make. I wonder, is there someone you know who has offended you in some way whom God has now forgiven but whom you still hold condemned? To whatever degree that may be true, *you* are the lost son. God our Father is now making his appeal. I implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. For the sake of Christ, God no longer counts their sins against them. Therefore as his child neither can you. So may God our Father give us all the grace to forgive as he has forgiven us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!