



# Seamen's Christian Friend Society

Incorporating the Merchant Navy Christian Fellowship

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## PASTOR'S LETTER

Dear Friend,

I am writing as Pastor of the SCFS Christian Fellowship and want you to know I have prayed for you and your family whether you are able to be on vacation at home or are separated by oceans, you are not forgotten.

The story of the Prodigal Son is probably one of the most well known passages in the Bible, yet the meaning is often not fully understood. Please read **Luke 15:1-31**. You will see from **V11** Jesus actually said it was about two sons, and the broken relationship with their father who represents God.

### Luke 15:11-31 ~ Lost Sons

- 1) Two ways to approach God ~ but both are wrong.
- 2) Two ways to be lost ~ away from God.
- 3) Only one way home.

#### 1) Two ways to approach God ~ but both are wrong.

The two sons represent the two groups who were listening to Jesus. **Luke 15:1** On the one hand, the tax collectors and sinners, on the other hand the Pharisees and religious teachers. Both had very different approaches to God which are still very common throughout our world today, but as you will see, Jesus teaches that both are wrong.

Perhaps it is more obvious that the younger son was a sinner, because even while his father was still alive, he took his share of his inheritance and wasted it when he, **V13** “..... *set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*” Just like the younger son in the story some sailors at sea take the opportunity while they are at sea, to do things they would not like to be seen doing at home. Like the younger son, those sailors sooner or later find this lifestyle is destructive for themselves and their families.

#### Let us compare the two sons / groups:-

1) The younger son represents the group who say: “It’s my life, I will do what I want, I just want to be happy. Some sailors might add, “It’s the seaman’s way of life.” Just as the younger brother wanted to get away from his father and his older brother, this group does not want to listen to Bible teaching. They see people like the older brother and the Pharisees who take the high moral traditional religious position as hypocritical and uncaring. They think as long as they are not violent or rob anyone (not as bad as others) that will be good enough for God. However we know God’s standards are much higher.

2) The older son represents the group who try so hard to live a high moral, traditionally religious lifestyle. They often think they are far superior to the obviously wayward group. Like the Pharisees, this group impose severe restrictions on themselves, but miss the vital points of the Ten Commandments given by God. They impose extra rules that they believe make them more acceptable to God. Read what Jesus said about the religious leaders, **Matthew 23:1-36. V24** “*You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*” Like the older son, their weaknesses show this group to be rather fragile and insecure, as they constantly fail to live up to the standard they themselves set and yet take pleasure in pointing an accusing finger at the other group, like the older son **V30** accused his brother. Often someone who shouts and gets angry about the wrong in others, is trying to hide personal guilt about even greater sins. Clearly this approach to God does not work.

#### 2) Two ways to be lost ~ away from God.

Although the brothers are different in some ways, it may surprise you to realise they also have a lot in common. Both are extremely self centred and angry. The younger son was so determined to take the money and go against his father when he left his home. **V28-30**. The older son was so angry with his father and would not join the celebrations when his brother returned home safe. Perhaps you feel sympathy for the older son, after all, his younger brother squandered his father’s property with prostitutes and yet when he came home, his father seemed to reward him. Perhaps like the older brother you have worked so hard at resisting sin and feel that God your Father owes you a good life and eternity

in heaven. This type of person wants to be his own Saviour and Lord of his own life. He says he believes we can only be saved by God's grace, but in reality he feels he deserves it, because he tries so hard to be good. **Matthew 7: 21-23** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, ..... " The older brother was not working to please his father, only for what his father could give him. **Luke 15:29** "But he answered his father, '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.'" This reveals his sinful nature. If our salvation depends on how well we serve God and living a sinless life, then none of us can be saved from the punishment our sins deserve. **Romans 3:23-24** "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The Biblical truth is that we can only be saved by the grace of God. It is entirely God's free gift and we cannot contribute anything. It is all of God, **1 Corinthians 6:19-20** "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price...." There is no limit to what God can ask of his children, yet we can trust him completely, even if like the disciples we are called to suffer. What I call 'elder brother spiritual deadness' is common in lots of apparently devout religious people. Their motive for doing good works is so that God will make things go well for them and their family. Lack of assurance of the love of God reveals itself in people who are quick to tell the good things they do, but cannot take criticism and hold grudges without true forgiveness. Their prayers are cold and lack intimacy. Both sons wanted their father's wealth, but not their father's controlling authority.

### 3) Only one way home.

God, represented by the father in the parable, welcomes his younger son **V20** before he had even said anything. Later in **V28** the father went out to plead with his older son to come in and celebrate with his brother. In the same way, we need to always remember **1 John 4:19** "We love because he first loved us." It is always God who first wants to make himself known to us, before we can respond. Then the younger son **HUMBLY REPENTS. V21** "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." This is unconditional submission and it is all God requires of us, because Christ already took the punishment we deserve as the perfect sacrifice in our place. We just have to accept this, but if we think we can contribute towards our own salvation then we have not yet put our complete trust in Christ. Notice that while the younger 'bad' son repents and is welcomed into the father's heart, while the stay-at-home older son who was so proud of the 'good' service he said he had done for his father, became angry and did not accept his father's invitation. Many who try to live good lives do not understand that they still need to repent of the wrong motives they have for doing good. It is self righteous to think because you did some good, God owes you anything. God wants you to love him unconditionally for what he has already done in giving his son to die on the cross for you. **Pray Now** > asking Christ to forgive you of your sins and receive his righteousness. When a sailor finishes his ten month contract and is met at the airport by his wife and children, imagine how he would feel if they just want him to open the bags to see what he has bought for them? He would feel unloved, as God does when we just want the gifts, not the giver. When you are boarding your ship, you cannot keep one foot on the dockside and one on the ship. The older son was not fully committed to serving his father, he only did it to get the wealth for himself. Do not let the good things you do, keep you from seeing your need to repent of your sins just like everyone else. Accept the authority of the Lord Jesus and try to learn as much as you can through Bible study about how he can give you the power and the 'joy' of serving him whether you are at sea or at home, to the glory of God alone. It was when the younger son was away from home that **V17** tells us, "... he came to his senses." I pray God will use this lesson from the Bible to encourage you to want to use your time at sea, to check your approach to God is based on the Bible and not just man's tradition.

At the last **SCFS conference** we heard from colleagues that more seafarers than ever before are experiencing great joy as they take Bible study guides, like "**The Bridge**" which clearly explains that only faith in Christ can bridge the gap between us and God caused by personal sin. On some ships, groups starting with just two or three meet to help each other study the Bible together. Having become established, an increasing number have become a "Church on the Oceans", the title of a book written by my colleague **Martin Otto**, SCFS, Hamburg. As you know sailors can seldom attend a church, so should a group of true believers not have their own church on their ship. "**The Only Bridge**" is a wonderful study book written by **Volker Lamaack**, SCFS, Hamburg to help group study.

Thank you for reading this letter, now I want you to reply to me in your preferred language. Tell me what this lesson means to you, request a study, make a prayer request or just confirm you received it. Tell me the name of your ship and ports of call and I may be able to arrange for a friend to visit you. Letters and emails from the wives of seamen are always welcome, especially by my wife Isobel.

Finally, I pray for your safety at sea and for your family at home. Remember to at least send me a postcard once a year to confirm you received this, many now use email. I remain yours in Christ,

Pastor David & Isobel Thomson