

On falling short and stumbling home

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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A few years ago, I was asked how long I had been a pastor. I forget how long it was precisely, but it must have been somewhere in the window of two to three years. I told my questioner this and the response was darkly humorous: "Oh, so long enough to disappoint some people." Indeed.

I was having a conversation with a friend recently about the broad strokes of our city's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. So much good has been done and it's wonderful to have played a role in it, however small. But with time comes the inevitability of disappointment. Some feel you haven't done enough or that your efforts are too selective or that you don't respond well enough to questions or you don't know enough answers or you won't help so and so or ... whatever. It sucks to feel like you've let people down. And it's easy to get annoyed at people's annoyance or frustration or lack of gratitude or failure to understand or ... whatever.

With time comes disappointment. That's just the way it goes. For all of us and in all kinds of ways.

Perhaps you've been an employee long enough to bump up against the limits of your abilities.

Or a friend long enough for them to see your ugly cynical side.

Or part of a community long enough to let people down.

Or a parent long enough to disappoint your kids.

Or a son or daughter long enough to frustrate your parents.

Or a lover long enough to demonstrate that you are actually not very good at loving at all.

We cannot be and do all the things that we need each other to be and do. We just can't. We are too small for that. We are too weak for those who need us to be

strong. We don't have enough time or wisdom or patience to act in less disappointing ways. There just isn't enough of us for all the need out there.

[I've written](#) often about my deep and abiding love for the story of the lost son in Luke 15:11–32. [I've remarked](#) on several occasions that this story, of all the stories in scripture, is the one that seems to tell my own in so many ways. It is a story that seems to contain almost the whole of human failure and frustration, hope and longing, love and desire. It is a story that tells the truth, in the deepest and most penetrating sense of the word. It is a story that picks me up and sets me back down rightly.

I read this story again in light of my recent conversation, in light of a string of disappointments that I have recently witnessed or actively added to. It struck me anew that this story Jesus tells is all about how we cannot be enough for one another, about how each character carries around and contributes to a profoundly disappointing narrative.

The younger son sets off full of disdain and desire. He's done with this stupid place and this stupid family. He has freedom on his mind and he's elated to be rid of the oppressive shackles of a father who doesn't understand him and a life that he never wanted. He doesn't care who he hurts or for how long, he just knows that he's gotten what he wants and that nothing will stand in his way now. He knows that his departure is one big extended middle finger to the people and the place that formed him in countless ways, but he doesn't care.

The older son grumbles in the shadows, rehearsing his list of grievances against his miserable ingrate of a brother, against his weak and pathetic father, against the burden of (largely self-imposed) duty that he daily struggles under, against a screwed-up world where merit is ignored and incompetence justified, where virtue goes unrewarded and vice has a riotous good time. He hates that his goodness goes unnoticed.

The father stands at the gate sick with worry and regret. Maybe even a bit of self-loathing, who knows? *Why couldn't I get through to him? What did I do wrong? What else could I have tried? What did he need that I couldn't see? That I wouldn't see? How could he treat me like this? Where will this stubborn road take him? Doesn't he know that I love him?* He despairs at the ways he has disappointed his sons, the way he continues to disappoint them. The way he will no doubt disappoint them in the

future.

The story is soaked in disappointment at every turn. It is a story of a family who, in their own ways and to varying degrees, cannot give each other what they need. It is a story of breakdown and failure—a story that tells so many of our stories in so many ways.

Until the end.

Until a crushing defeat is met with a tear-stained embrace. Until agonized humiliation encounters “all is forgiven.” Until “what about me?” meets “all I have is yours.” Until the many ways in which we fall short come up against irrational and scandalously unmerited mercy. Until our countless disappointments shrink in the face of a fierce and relentless love. Until the many things that we cannot be *to* and *for* each other encounter the only one who ever could.

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