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The Parable of the Prodigal Son's Father Luke 15:11-32

Of all the teaching our Lord did during his earthly ministry, none has captured the attention and provoked the thoughts of men and women more than his teaching in parables. Virtually 1/3 of the words Jesus recorded in the NT is in the form of parables. And of all the parables, none is as elaborate or reveals the artistry and poetic genius of Jesus as does the parable of the prodigal son. This parable has rightly been called the pearl and crown of all the parables. Throughout church history it has been the focus of more painters, artists, musicians, poets, and dramatists than any other parable. Everyone who wrestles seriously with it “ends up with a sense of awe at its inexhaustible content” (Kenneth Bailey, 158).

And yet, ironically, this the most majestic of Jesus's parables is probably the most *misunderstood*. That this is true is evident from the name we have given to it: “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” The fact is, this parable is not primarily about the prodigal son at all, but *the prodigal son's father!* It isn't the principal aim of Jesus in this parable to teach us about the nature of sin, or the ill-effects and consequences of immoral living, or even the need to be careful in how we handle our money. The focus of the parable is not the younger son's rebellion or his older brother's self-righteous obedience, but the father of both.

As we will shortly see, it is not the licentiousness of the son but the love of his father that is in view. It is not the nature of human beings, be they male or female, that constitutes the heart of this parable, but the nature of God. It is not our Lord's purpose to teach us about the conviction of sin, but rather the compassion of God.

Simply put: the focus of the parable is the prodigal son's *father*, in whom we see an illustration of the infinite, unconditional, eternal, passionate, deeply affectionate love of God for sinners like you and me.

One way to approach this story is to break it down into five chapters: (1) a shameful request (vv. 11-12); (2) a sinful rebellion (vv. 13-16); (3) a suspect, but likely sincere, repentance (vv. 17-19); (4) a shocking reception (vv. 20-24); and (5) a sibling's reaction (vv. 25-32). However, as much as it may help you for me to break down the story into these five scenes, my fear is that it may serve to obscure the singular point that Jesus is laboring to make. That being said, I will go ahead and make use of this five-fold structure.

A Shameful Request (vv. 11-12)

The request by the younger son that his father give him his inheritance in advance may not be something that strikes us in the western world in 2019 as being all that unusual. I suppose there are circumstances today where a young man leaves home for Europe or Asia to seek a new life and perhaps to start up a new business and asks his father for his inheritance. Who knows, there may even be a tax benefit to doing so. But I can assure you of this: *under no circumstances was this permissible or approved of in Jewish culture of the first century.*

According to Jewish custom, the inheritance was always transferred through the male line, from father to son. In a family where there were two children, the first-born or elder son would receive 2/3 of the estate while the younger son would receive 1/3 (see Deut. 21:15-17).

In asking, indeed demanding, that he be given his share of the inheritance while his father was still alive was more than an insult. It was more than a declaration that he no longer wanted to be identified with his family. *It was tantamount to wishing that his father was dead!* As one commentator has put it, “the son is, in effect, writing his father's death certificate” (J. Edwards, 438). At the very least the younger son is making it known that he wanted his father's money, not his father.

The father could have responded in any number of ways. He could have said: “No, you'll have to wait until I'm dead just as I had to wait until my father was dead.” Or he could have said: “If it's some extra spending money you need, I'd be happy to give it to you.” Or: “I'll give you a portion of your inheritance and if you do well, I may decide to give

you the rest.” Or he could have refused and pleaded with his son not to dishonor the family by making such a demand. But he instead gives him what he asked for.

But there is something even more remarkable in this parable. This son not only requests his portion of the inheritance from his father, which itself was a grievous insult, but evidently also requests that he be given the authority and right to dispose of it or spend it as he pleased (v. 13). If an inheritance is ever given prior to the father’s death the child has only the right of ownership but not the right to dispose of his share. The property is his, but he cannot sell it. Apparently, this young man pressures his father into granting him full right to make use of the inheritance in any way he sees fit. Normally, after turning over possession to a son the father would retain the right to live off the proceeds of the estate as long as he is alive.

The response that everyone in the first-century would have anticipated, never comes to pass. Everyone would have expected the father to severely discipline this arrogant, insulting, utterly rebellious son, perhaps even physically beat him. Thus ***the surprise in this story isn’t so much what the son does, but what his father doesn’t do!*** This is but the first dramatic illustration of the father’s love for his son, and God’s love for you and me.

The father’s shocking love for his son is highlighted when we take note of another facet of the culture of that day. The gift to one’s child would be considered valid only if done voluntarily and not under duress or pressure. The father in this parable is clearly under duress. Evidently, then, in order to meet the requirements of the law he acts as if he has decided on his own to give away his property, thus ***protecting his rebellious son from possible legal reprisals and social disdain.***

The behavior of the older son is also noteworthy, but for the wrong reasons. He is not said to have done anything, and that’s precisely the problem! Note that he also receives his share of the inheritance (v. 12). He should have responded in two ways. First, he should have protested his younger brother’s request and thus should have refused to take his own share. He should have supported his father and honored the cultural traditions of the day. That he remains silent suggests that his relationship with the father was not on good terms. Second, as was the custom of the day, he should have acted as a mediator between his father and his younger brother and worked hard to resolve the problem and the breach between the two.

So, to sum up thus far: the prodigal requests and receives possession and disposition of his share of the inheritance. Both requests were unheard of in that day and time. Both requests constitute a horrible insult and dishonoring of his father. ***Each request meant that the son was in a hurry for his father to die.*** The father is himself expected to refuse the requests and to severely discipline his son. Instead, in an utterly unprecedented act of love, he grants both wishes. The older son likewise dishonors his father by remaining silent when he should have spoken up to help resolve the problem.

A Sinful Rebellion (vv. 13-16)

The young prodigal immediately turns his property into cash (v. 13). This was probably due to two factors. First, he obviously wanted to get on with his wild and immoral living. But second, he also acted quickly in order to avoid the disdain and hostility of the community.

The word translated ***“reckless living”*** (v. 13) means wild, abandoned, loose, without regard for rules or outcome. According to v. 30, this involved sexual involvement with prostitutes. Sinful rebellion always feels free and exhilarating for a brief time. It feels like you have cast aside chains that held you down. It feels like the thrill one has on jumping out of an airplane, until you realize you don’t have a parachute!

It was not uncommon for there to be famines in those days. But it would have been extraordinarily hard on this young Jewish man because he had ventured outside Israel: he “took a journey into a far country” (v. 13). In other words, he traveled into ***Gentile*** territory, where he would have no friends or family and would have been quite vulnerable to abuse.

After spending his last dollar, he “hired himself out” to a pig farmer, obviously a Gentile (v. 15). Literally, he “joined himself” or “unites himself” or even “glues himself” to someone. We know this had to be a Gentile because it was forbidden to Jews to raise pigs. It is written in the Talmud: “Cursed be the man who would breed swine.”

The polite way to get rid of someone like this young prodigal would be to assign him a task so unpleasant and repulsive that he would leave voluntarily. This Gentile must have said to himself: "It won't take long for this young Jewish fellow to take one look at what he's doing, and he'll move on to someone else." Simply put: it is hard to envision a more effective portrayal of depravity for a first-century Jew.

What were these "*pods*" that he longed to eat (v. 16)? It was most likely the kind that was between 4 and 10 inches long and up to an inch in thickness. They were used to feed both donkeys and pigs. The pigs would typically grub in them for their berries. It can be eaten by humans but is neither tasty nor nutritious. Not only is he, a Jew, feeding pigs. He's fallen so low that he's eating the same food they ate!

You may wonder why he didn't simply eat the pigs. After all, a ham sandwich would taste great in comparison with these pods! But again, this man is a Jew. Evidently there was enough of his Jewish heritage still left in him that kept him from violating the Mosaic Law which prohibited the Jews from ingesting pork.

And to make matters worse, the text says that no one was providing him with any help. This may suggest that he had resorted to begging for food.

A Suspect, but likely Sincere, Repentance (vv. 17-19)

I call this a "suspect, but likely sincere" act of repentance on the part of young man. Scholars differ. Many think his remorse is not so much for the sins he committed against his father but rather for the realization that he has finally come to the end of his resources. He's at the bottom of the barrel. It is physical hunger, not spiritual conviction or guilt, that motivates him.

On the other hand, the text says, "*he came to himself*" (v. 17) or "he came to his senses." I think what happened is that he woke up to his true identity and purpose. I think this is a hint that his repentance was genuine. It appears that he suddenly realized that he wasn't created for chaos and immorality and idolatry. He was created by God, in God's image, and for God. He had come to grips with the reason why he was on this earth.

Note that he formulates a plan that has two parts, a plan that he hopes will convince his father to take him back. He's probably convinced that if he were to return home his father would beat him or reject him or subject him to public ridicule.

First, according to v. 18, he will confess that he has broken the fifth commandment: he has not honored his father and mother. We can only speculate that if he had not lost his money, he perhaps would have never thought of confessing his sin. In other words, perhaps he is motivated by sheer hunger. Maybe it is an empty stomach that moves him, not the conviction of sin in his heart. But I remain convinced his change of heart and mind was genuine.

Second, he will offer himself to his father as a hired servant. A hired servant was considered independent of the man for whom he worked. He would live separately from him and could eventually earn enough income to repay the debt he owed. Some believe this suggests the prodigal has not truly changed. By becoming a hired servant, he can retain both his pride and his freedom. It also means he won't be dependent on his older brother.

However, the fact that he is willing to confess in v. 19 that he is "no longer worthy to be called" his father's "son" tells me that he is genuinely heartbroken and has come to grips with the severity of his sin and the way he has dishonored and disgraced his dad. We can only guess at what the young prodigal was thinking as he returned home: "How will dad respond? Will he beat me? Will he turn his back on me? Will he impose on me impossible rules and regulations? Will he mock me in front of others? Will he have me killed? Will he tell me it's too late; you had your chance and you blew it?"

Perhaps some of you today are asking the same question as you contemplate how God will respond should you turn from your sin and run home to him.

A Shocking Reception (vv. 20-24)

By this time, the father may well have assumed that his younger son was dead. He undoubtedly knows that if he is alive and chooses to come home he is in for a rude awakening. He will suffer immediate judgment, mockery, and verbal abuse from the surrounding community. Therefore, what we see the father do was undoubtedly designed by him to protect his son from this mistreatment. ***He didn't want his son to endure humiliation and shame at the hands of the people in the city.***

Evidently, the father receives word that his son is returning.

Things are different today. But in the first-century Jewish culture, a middle-aged man, the owner of a large and wealthy estate, a man with servants who were present to do everything he asked, such men do not run in public! There is a certain social decorum and personal dignity to maintain. But this man throws caution to the wind. He couldn't care less what others think or say of him. His child has come home! That's the way God feels about your coming home.

Don't overlook the fact that ***the father doesn't wait for the son to return to the village.*** Instead, while the prodigal "was still a long way off" his father immediately runs to the edge of town to receive him. When the prodigal saw him running, he must have been shocked. Rather than having to face an angry mob he witnesses the most amazing, visible demonstration of love anyone could imagine. The father whom he has insulted and sinned against willingly does what in itself would have incurred the disdain of the community: he runs to his son to receive him and embrace him.

The father embraced him and "kissed him" (v. 20), a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. The son only delivers a portion of the speech he planned on giving (v. 21). He doesn't say all that he had planned. Note that the words, "Treat me as one of your hired servants" are not spoken. Why? Maybe the son is thinking, "Hey, this is turning out better than I thought. I'll not say anything about becoming a hired servant and see where it gets me." But this assumes his repentance was fake, insincere, and hypocritical. My guess is that he didn't say anything more because he was either interrupted by his father or simply overwhelmed by the display of love that was showered upon him.

The father's instructions are specific. All three items were symbols of status and honor. (1) Bring the best ***robe***, undoubtedly his father's personal robe worn only on feast days and occasions of celebration. It's one way the father protects his son against the disdain of the community. (2) The ***ring*** would have been a signet ring, a sign of trust. (3) The ***sandals*** on his feet were a sign of his being a free man in the house. And to top it all off, he gives orders to kill the "fattened calf". This calf would have been one specially fed and saved for unique occasions. Many think that since it is a calf and not a goat or sheep that the father planned on inviting the entire community to the party. In any case, ***the father regards his son's return home as a virtual resurrection from the dead!***

Please don't overlook the ***celebration*** that was to follow (v. 24). Again, in v. 32, the father tells his older son that it was only "fitting to celebrate and be glad." Earlier in Luke 15 we read of two more parables that portray the recovery of what was lost. First, in vv. 3-7 Jesus describes the man who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one that wandered off. When he returns home, he calls on everyone to "rejoice with me" because the one lost sheep was found (v. 6). Again, he says there will be "joy" in heaven over the one sheep that was found. And in vv. 8-10 he tells the parable of the woman who lost one of her ten silver coins. Once she has found it, she calls on everyone to "rejoice with me" (v. 9). And Jesus says, "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10).

When we contemplate the depths of our rebellion and sin and the heights of God's love and forgiveness, not to celebrate, not to be glad, is simply unthinkable. In fact, we are told in v. 25 that there was "music and dancing"! Don't ever look with disdain or resentment on those whose response to God's saving grace is exuberant, joyful, and expressive.

A Sibling's Reaction (vv. 25-32)

We come now to the fifth and final chapter in this story: a sibling's reaction.

The older brother is unusually cautious, even suspicious. A son with a good relationship with his father would have immediately entered into the feast and celebrated in the joy of his brother's return home. The older son's behavior is just one more slap in the face of his father. He should have been the one presiding over the party. If he wants to complain he should have waited until after the feast and done so in private.

It's obvious that the relationship between the older son and the father is just as broken as that between the young prodigal and the father. The older son's refusal to enter in and join everyone at the banquet was a huge public insult. Once again, the custom of the day would have expected the father to rebuke him in front of everyone. But instead, just as with the younger son, ***the father humbles himself and demonstrates an utterly uncharacteristic depth of love and compassion.***

The younger, prodigal son appears to have responded rightly when he saw his father's love, but the older son did not. He refuses to address his father with the appropriate title. He displays the attitude of a slave: "Look, these many years I have served you. Where is my reward?" He is like a laborer disputing with his boss over wages.

He insults his father publicly yet again when he has the audacity to say, "I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends" (v. 29). In saying this, it is likely he is playing to the crowd, hoping to garner their sympathy and shame his father into giving him more stuff.

He accuses his father of favoritism: the words "to me" are emphatic . . . "to me you never gave so much as a young goat. You gave him the fattened calf; I don't even get a goat!" And notice how he refuses even to speak of his brother as his brother: he calls him, "this son of yours" (v. 30). He only refers to his brother's past sins and says nothing of his repentance and return home.

Let's look closely at the father's response.

First, the father ignores the insult and the charge against his integrity and responds in love and concern. Rather than referring to the older brother as his "son" he uses a term of tenderness and affection: "***child***" (v. 31; not "son" as the ESV renders it).

Second, instead of denouncing him in public and perhaps even disciplining him, which is what everyone in the community would have expected, he "***entreated***" him (v. 28). He doesn't command but invites and implores him.

Third, whereas the older son says emphatically, "I have ***never*** disobeyed" you and you "***never*** gave me a young goat" (v. 29), the father counters with a generous, "Son, you are ***always*** with me, and ***all*** that is mine is yours" (v. 31).

Fourth, he reminds his son that his rights have never been violated. His inheritance has never been taken away. In fact, everything the father owns belongs also to his son. The return of the younger son does not in any way undermine or affect what the older brother has received.

Fifth, the older brother's request to have money sufficient to throw a party with his friends is tantamount to demanding the right to dispose of his inheritance any way he pleases. In other words, ***the older brother is now guilty of committing the same sin as did his younger brother.*** The story comes ***full circle*** with the older brother repeating the offense of his younger brother: he too is, in effect, expressing his desire that his father should die.

The ***irony*** of the two sons is striking. The son who was lost and outside is now inside, while the son who was inside and safe is now outside. The son who was disobedient is given a huge celebration, while the son who was faithful has none. The young son felt fortunate to be a servant in his father's house while the older son resented it.

The younger son who has squandered everything in reckless living, confesses his sin. The older son who has remained faithful and frugal insists on his rights. The younger son "renounces all claims to sonship and invites servitude; the elder complains of disappointed sonship and despises the servitude to which he thinks himself unfairly reduced. The younger receives mercy from his father; the elder accuses the father in resentful self-righteousness" (J. Edwards, 442).

Lessons to Learn about the Father's Love for Us

First, there is no sin, however deep and dark and persistent, that can repel or drive God away from us. You are his child, and nothing can dampen God's love for you. I'm reminded of the line in that song we sing:

"There's nothing I can do that would ever make you love me more. There's nothing I can do that would ever make you love me less."

The father didn't just love the prodigal before he rebelled. ***He loved him while he was in the midst of his rebellion. His love persisted all the way through the incredible insult that his son had hurled at him.*** We mistakenly think that God loves us only so long as we remain loveable. Or we think that God will only love some future version of ourselves. It is obvious from the parable that ***the prodigal's father had no desire to shame him. And God has no desire to shame you either!***

We mistakenly think that when we fail, God's love falters. His love hangs suspended on the consistency of our commitment. When we pull away or fail miserably, his love diminishes and will eventually disappear altogether. No! This isn't to suggest that God is pleased with our sinful rebellion or when we replace him with some stupid idol. It is simply to say that he loves us anyway!

Second, we all live with this fear: "I'm afraid of going to the well of God's goodness once too often. I'm afraid that my sin is so great, and I repeat it so often, that the water of his forgiving love will have dried up. The well will be empty." No! You can no more exhaust God's forgiving love than you can exhaust God. If you should ever go to the well of his forgiving grace and discover that it is dry or empty, then it must be because God himself is dead. As long as he lives, he loves.

Third, we often say: "But I'm not good enough to be loved by God in this way." You're right! No one is. That may well be the first thing you said that is true! And that's what makes God's love so astounding. If the prodigal son had been kind and generous and worthy and obedient, who would ever have thought much of the father's love for him? That kind of love is easy to understand. ***But the father's love for his child, God's love for you, his daughter, his son, is stunning and mind-blowing and breath-taking precisely because it defies all human categories and human expectations.***

If you thought you were good enough to be loved by God, you wouldn't want it. If you were that good, why would you even ***need*** God's affection? The only way to experience and appreciate the love of God is to come to the point where you confess that there is nothing of which you are less worthy. Then God has you right where he wants you. Then you are primed and prepared to experience that same quality and kind of love that the prodigal received from his father.

Those of you who have wandered off into rebellion, doing your own thing, ignoring God's grace and insulting his honor . . . you wonder what will happen if you should choose to turn and make your way back to God. I'll tell you what will happen. You will find your heavenly Father running down that prodigal road, running with a ring and a robe, running to you with open arms to graciously take you back to himself.

I have one more word of application. It is for you who are tempted to say: "I've never rebelled openly against God. I've avoided scandalous sin. I'm not perfect, but I'm no prodigal. I've been in church all my life. I've never knowingly or intentionally insulted or dishonored God. I've been a good Christian girl/boy all my life. I sit in the same seat at Bridgeway every week. I'm devoted to God. But no one celebrates my faithfulness. So what's in it for me?"

What's in it for you is the same as what's in it for the repentant prodigal. All that God has is yours. He is as passionate in his love and affection for you as he is for the prodigal. Don't think there isn't a party in heaven for you. Don't think the angels fail to celebrate your salvation.

But in the end, we must not forget that this parable isn't about either of the two brothers. Can you see that it's all about the father, a father whose love and devotion and passion and affection for his children defies all human expectations, defies all human concepts of what love really is, defies every fear that you and I might have about what God will do if we would but return to him.