

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, Part 1

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Luke 15:1-2, 11-24

This is a very familiar parable, but I hope we can dig more deeply into it today.

Introduction: Luke 15:1-2

The Pharisees 'grumble' because Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were regarded as dishonest. Sinners were people who broke the Law repeatedly.

Both groups were beyond the pale as far as the Pharisees were concerned. They were outsiders – unacceptable. But Jesus eats with them – accepting them as part of Jesus' Kingdom community. Jesus answers the grumbling in 3 parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the two lost sons. Today I'll just look at the first half of the parable of the two lost sons.

The parable: 15:11-24

The younger son wants his share of the property – and wants to cash it up. What is he really saying? To ask for his inheritance while the father is still alive is to wish his father dead already! He is actually saying: "Father, I wish you were already dead." "Why don't you drop dead!"

This is unheard of in antiquity. There is no discussion of this in Jewish texts because a son requesting the inheritance while his father was alive is unthinkable! The listeners would have drawn in their breath in shock and horror.

How *should* the father have reacted? **Deut 21:18-21**

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.

But what does the father actually do? He gives the son what he asks for and divides the property! Remarkable! This is an amazing father! 'In a costly demonstration of unexpected love the Father grants the request' (Bailey).

And the son sells up – he turns land into cash.

What happens next. A down-ward trajectory!

- Journey into a far country. Far away, among Gentiles.
- Dissolute living: the idea is that he wastes all his money! He's not immoral – just expensive and extravagant.

- What happens – a severe famine. There's quite a time scale implied here. Severe famines don't happen over night.

What would someone normally do in a famine in Biblical times – turn to their family. But he is far away and has burned his bridges! He is a stranger and alone. The crowd of listeners tut tut. This is the sort of thing that happens to sons who want their father dead.

- What can the son do? Hires himself out and feeds the pigs. The boss must be a Gentile – Jews wouldn't own pigs, since they are unclean and Jews are forbidden to eat pigs. The thought of eating pigs food would disgust Jewish hearers. They are probably wild carob pods – very unappetizing. How low can you go!

But notice that he does not actually eat these carob pods. 'He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating'. The Greek makes it clear that this is an unfulfilled wish – the pigs ate these but he could not. Probably the pigs could digest these pods but the human digestive system cannot cope – our stomachs are not made for this since the pods are bitter and without nourishment. He longs for a pigs stomach! "The prodigal, a Jew, is reduced to wishing he were a pig! The pigs can eat until they are satisfied. He cannot' (Bailey).

'And no one gave him anything'. He is alone!¹

Clearly, the father in the story represents God. Notice then the portrayal that the parable gives of what happens when we wish that God was dead and seek to live life without God. We end up in dire straits. It is a picture of the problem of sin! Of the ruin of our lives that comes from living without God. And it also speaks of God's preparedness to let us wander – God gives us the freedom to ruin ourselves! But, as we'll see, it is also a picture of God's wonderful treatment of sinners.

- Then he comes to himself and decides that hired hands at home are better off than he is. At least they can eat!

- And so he prepares a speech. That his father has hired hands shows he is wealthy.

Why does the son want to return home?

Out of hunger.

Is he sorry about what he has done?

Perhaps a little – but really he just wants food!

What's this about being a hired hand?

His request is that he be a hired hand, rather than a son. He wouldn't live under the same roof as his father. He can maintain his independence and doesn't have to be reconciled with his father – such a reconciliation would be humbling for him. And he knows it is quite impossible to be reinstated as a son – he has wanted his father dead! But perhaps, as a hired hand he can pay the father back – slowly! Then he can earn enough to restore his place in the

¹ *Hearers* at this point will think the son has got what he deserved for dishonouring his father. He is lost. He is a sinner – he has done lots of bad things – starting with telling his father to die. And he has got his just deserts!

family. He can then pay compensation, as it were.

So off he goes.

Verse 20 is the turning point: 'But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion'.

- The father has been waiting and waiting and watching and watching. The son had left home – wanting the father dead. As far as the village is concerned, the son is lost, dead and gone. But the father never gave up hope for the son's return and continued to wait and watch. The father kept the son in his heart. The father wants the son back!!

The father is filled with compassion. Is this expected? No! But the father will not let go of his son!

Then: 'he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him'

Is it unusual that the father runs?

Why does the father run?

Older men in the Middle East do not run except in an emergency. Hiking up flowing robes in order to run not only lacks dignity, it inappropriately exposes legs to public view and hence causes dishonor. But the father does run because the son is in immediate danger from hostile villagers. (Malina and Rohrbaugh)

So this is about protection from the village. The father shows the village that this prodigal is accepted and ensures his acceptance by the village. For the village will know that not only has he wanted his father dead, but he has then lost his inheritance, and not only that, but lost it to Gentiles who feed pigs! The son *needs* protection from the father!

Yet it is humiliating to the father. This is a costly and visible demonstration of unexpected love. It shows the radical love of the father

So the father shows forgiveness and acceptance – and welcoming him back into an intimate relationship. The one who wanted the father dead is welcomed back as a loved son!

The son's prepared speech. What happens to it?

The son's prepared speech:

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' '

... ..

The son's actual speech:

²¹Then the son said to him,

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

He doesn't finish the speech. Why not. Its not that he's interrupted – he does not say 'treat

me like one of your hired hands’.

Is he repentant?

Yes – now when he has seen the love of the Father he is overcome. He no longer *wants* to be a hired hand. He cannot earn his way back into the family.

But he sees that he *does not need* to work his way back!

He *has been* accepted. Wow!! The Father wanted the son back – restored to relationship. So the son does not need to become a hired hand. He has been transformed back into a son. And the problem – he now sees – is not the money, but the broken relationship with the father. He cannot offer any solution to the broken relationship, but he also does not need to! The father has done all that is needed.

Now then, he is truly repentant. True repentance comes after acceptance! Now what he means is ‘I am unworthy of this stunning public costly demonstration of unexpected love which has just unfolded before my eyes’ (Bailey, Lost, p153).

What is the father's response to the lost son? The father again displays his great love – and *demonstrates* reconciliation. He shows that he is a son again!

- The 'best robe' is what the father wore for special occasions. By wearing his father's robe, the community would know that the son had been accepted by the one whom he had dishonoured.
- The ring is quite likely a signet ring, the ring of the family, which means that he is trusted in a remarkable way.
- The shoes are the sign of his being a free man in the house, not a servant.

Bailey (Lost, p155): ‘the prodigal is given honour (the best robe), trust (a signet ring) and self-respect (sandals)’.

- The killing of the fatted calf implies a fabulous party at which the whole village would be present. (A normal big party includes killing a sheep, not a calf). It is to celebrate his return as a son. And it is an opportunity for the son to be welcomed back into the community. He is not just a son, but also a special guest!

So the son is protected from hostility and is restored to fellowship. He has un-sonned himself. He is re-sonned!

As I've said, the father is clearly God – and I think we are the son.

Been a prodigal lately? Some of us may have been.

But perhaps it's helpful to see that the son wants his father out of his life. The son wants to live as if his father does not exist.

This I think is something we can all identify with. Wanting to live without God. Turning away. We're all prodigals – in our own way. Sometimes we go to the far country and ruin our lives for a while. Sometimes we don't travel, but still want to live without God.

And God lets us do it! That's the whole point of the father giving the prodigal his share of the

inheritance – God *lets us* live as if God were dead. As one author puts it God ‘is willing to endure the agony of rejected love’ (Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, p116).

But the waiting, running Father exemplifies God’s compassion for us all. The parable exhibits the radical love of a father for his rebellious son which parallels God’s amazing love for us all.

I’ve said the father in the story is certainly an image of God – of God searching for us, of the amazing love that God has for humanity.

But the father in the story is *also* an image of *Jesus*. In the story, Jesus is the one who is seeking the lost! *He* is putting up with much suffering from the Pharisees. The father humiliates himself by running – in order to receive the son.

Jesus is being humiliated – paying a price - because he welcomes tax collectors and sinners. And this whole story will end in Jesus’ death – his humiliation on the cross of shame.

The Father’s outstretched arms to the prodigal are later imitated by Jesus’ outstretched arms on the cross. The two are the same. In the Father’s humiliating running we see imaged Jesus’ humiliating death for the world. And in both we see the extent that love will go – for us. In both we see a costly and visible demonstration of unexpected love.

Here too in the cross we see God’s love focused for us. The costly love of the Father is shown also in the costly love of the Son for us on the cross – for it is one love – the one love that seeks our reconciliation, our return to be children of God. It is with such costly love that Jesus seeks out tax collectors and sinners. And it is with such costly love that he seeks us out. As Paul said in Rom 5:8: ‘But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.’

How do we preach the Gospel in our world? Perhaps we might speak about lostness, and we certainly need to talk at some point about sin. But its much more effective to speak about being found! About the waiting, running father! About the love that God the Father and Jesus the Son have for this wayward, and lost world.

And do you notice how the parable ends:

‘For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.’

The son was dead. In wishing the father dead, in turning away from the father, the son actually becomes dead himself. In coming back to the father the son ‘is alive again’! This is all the difference – between death and life. This is a story of resurrection life!

Of course we celebrate!!

We are a community of prodigals. Because of the waiting and running Father, because of the outstretched arms of the Father and of Jesus the Son on the cross, we who were lost are found, we who were dead become alive! May we celebrate!!