

## Parable of the Two Prodigal Sons – the Second Son Leith Valley, Sunday 11 December

A few weeks back I preached on the first son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Of course, there are two sons and today I want to preach on the second son. As we'll see, the title of the parable should probably be 'The Parable of the Two Prodigal Sons'

Here's how the chapter starts.

Introduction: Luke 15:1-2:

The Pharisees 'grumble' because Jesus eats 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. They are acceptable – as they are. But this is too much for the Pharisees. They think that the sinners should get their acts together *before* they are accepted.

Jesus answers the grumbling in 3 parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the two lost sons.

The first son represents the tax collectors and sinners – those who are obvious sinners, who want God dead, who turn their back on God and go to the far country. The parable tells us that God watches and then runs to welcome such sinners.

But what about this second son. Notice how he first features.

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

Listeners to the parable will be shocked at this point. I mentioned that the younger son wanting his 'share of the property' is the equivalent to wanting his father dead. Its terrible! We easily miss it, but the older son features here too. We're told the father 'divided his property between them' – so the older son gets his share! Hearers of the parable would expect the older son to loudly *refuse to accept* his share – in protest against the implications that the father should be dead! But he *accepts* his portion of the inheritance in silence!

And, seeing that there was a problem between the father and the younger son, hearers would also immediately expect the older brother to act as a *reconciler* at this point. The older brother should never let the younger brother get away with such impudence. He should intervene! He should broker peace. For in the Middle East, disagreements are regularly healed by a third party. But the older son does nothing! He lets the younger son go! This is already an indication that there is something wrong going on with the older son.

And then he features again in v25:

<sup>25</sup> “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’

So the elder son has been hard at work – probably supervising all the other workers. He comes home and hears the music. What do we expect him to do? To go in, of course! He’ll soon find out what is happening, and he’ll then join the party. But this older son does not do that. He wants to know what’s going on first – as if the family has no right to start a party without him! So he calls one of the slaves, who tells him –

‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

So why is the older son angry? Why does he refuse to go in? Because the younger son has been received by the father – ‘he has got him back safe and sound.’ ‘Safe and sound’ – not in the sense that he is healthy – the younger son is malnourished! The idea is that he has been received ‘with peace’. The idea is that the relationship has been restored. How does the slave know this? Everyone has heard about the Father’s costly love so vividly demonstrated in the village.

But this makes the older son angry! The older son does not agree with what the father has done. For him, the younger son is an irresponsible fool who should get a job and pay back the money before he comes anywhere near the house! So he refuses to go in to the party.

But is it OK to refuse to go in? No – refusal to go in is an insult to his father. Clearly the father is throwing the party. He is insulting, shaming his father by staying outside.

We probably miss the activity of the grape vine at this point.

The fatted calf has been killed and a banquet thrown. A fatted calf could feed about 200 people at a party – so this is a massive celebration. There are lots of people around! The older son is in a courtyard of some sort. Word quickly spreads from person to person – the older son is here! But he’s refusing to come in! What an outrage! The news spreads like wild fire.

So quite quickly the father hears.  
INTERLUDE – the father appears.

What should the father do? He should be really, really cross. He is being humiliated in public by this terrible son! He should give orders for this son to be punished, or locked up! He should come out of the house into the courtyard and beat his son and then lock him up himself! He should show him who is boss! Everyone is tense!

But what does he do instead! ‘His father came out and *began to plead with him*’. The

listeners are shocked! How humiliating for the father!!! This is painful, self-less love in the middle of the courtyard! Another costly demonstration of unexpected love!

What does he say? He pleads with him! No rebuke! Just pleading! Please come and join the celebration! He humbles himself!

Why does the father do this? If he comes out and punishes the son there will be greater bitterness and deeper estrangement. If he overlooks the offence, he is finished as a father. And the father *wants a son!* The only way to win the son back is to humiliate himself – to open the door to genuine reconciliation and restoration. And so he pays the price of reconciliation.

How does the older son respond now? Surely he will be overcome! V29: What does he say:

‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends

We would expect the older son to be softened by the father’s display of humility. No! What do you notice? He starts off by being rude: ‘Listen!’ No respectful term of address! Even the prodigal son had begun his speech in v12 with “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me’. And in v18: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’.

So this older son is just plain rude, insulting. Imagine addressing royalty in this way: ‘Listen ...’ When we were in the UK, we met the Queen mother ...

- On presentation to The *Queen*, the correct formal *address* is 'Your Majesty' and subsequently 'Ma'am,' pronounced with a short 'a,' as in 'jam'. For male members of the Royal Family the same rules apply, with the title used in the first instance being 'Your Royal Highness' and subsequently 'Sir'.

So the older son is very, very rude!!

But what does he say:

‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

This guy is thoroughly deluded. ‘For all these years I have been working like a slave for you’ ... This is the most amazing Father! We’ve seen that – he’s the waiting, watching, running, pleading father. He has shown the most amazing patience already! He doesn’t *want* a slave! He wants a son! No *master* would humiliate himself the way this father just has for a *slave*! This father *wants* a son! And yet the older son sees himself as a slave! The older son – or should we say, the older slave – *does not know* this father, is estranged from him.

‘I have never disobeyed your command’ – yet here he is shaming his father! He may have kept the law, but his relationship to his father is shattered.

‘Yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends’. Really? The whole farm is the older brothers!! He was given it at the beginning of the story! Note the accusation of favouritism – you love him – he’s got a fatted calf. I don’t even have a young goat. ‘Love him – don’t love me’. But is that true? No!! There is irony here – the Father is making the most amazing show of love, even as the older son accuses the father of lack of love! And note who he wants to celebrate with – ‘my friends’. He doesn’t want to celebrate with the family at all ... He writes himself out of his family! He’s lost.

But still he goes on:

‘But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

‘This son of yours’. Hold it!! He should be ‘my brother’! He really is estranged!

‘Who has devoured your property with prostitutes’... What do we make of this? The first half of the parable is quite careful *not* to say this. V13 says the younger son ‘squandered his property in dissolute living.’ This is about wasting all his money. He’s not immoral – just expensive and extravagant. So the older son is well and truly exaggerating! He’s improvising. He is purposefully blackening the younger sons reputation. And in public! He wants the younger son to be rejected, shamed – certainly not accepted.

Bailey suggests this about the older son: ‘He is consumed with envy, pride, bitterness, sarcasm, anger, resentment, self-centredness, hate, stinginess, self-satisfaction and self-deception’!.

What do we expect the Father to do? To cry out ‘Enough! Lock him up! I will deal with him later!’ (Bailey).

Clearly the older son is lost – even when at home. He’s estranged from his father, from his brother, from his family. He doesn’t know this wonderful father that he has – he thinks he’s miserly when actually he’s most wonderfully generous.

The father is an image of God. The older son is *lost at home*. We don’t have to go into the far country to be lost. We can be lost while being – seemingly – respectable. While keeping working on the family farm. Doing all the right things! We can still be lost. The Pharisees are in view. They were certainly not running into the far country. They were ‘establishment figures’. But the parable is saying you can be lost at home! You can miss what God is doing, while it seems as if everything is alright. I can be lost ... in the midst of respectability.

And see how completely wrong the older son is in his view of others – how sin, estrangement from God, completely warps his perception. He doesn’t know God. He

doesn't know his brother. He even sees himself as a slave! Sin, warps our perception, skews our judgment, unbalances our thinking! He says 'I have never disobeyed your command' ... Well perhaps he's kept the Father's commandments. But where is the Father in his life? Far away! The older son keeps commandments – but as a slave! And there is no love in his heart for this Father.

This older son will not let the Father be generous! Will not let the Father accept the prodigal. He doesn't want the Father to be his Father – or anyone else's either!! God – you need to apply the rules to this guy! He's been bad and you should punish him!

How easy it is to not want God to be gracious!

How do *I* stop God being generous? Being gracious!

I can want to stop God being gracious, to others. We can say, or think this: 'God should not accept that person – look at who they are! Look at what they've done. They don't deserve it! That's not fair!' But God loves the ungodly!

Its particularly easy if we've been Christians for a long time, or lived our whole life in a Christian family to resent grace being given to others, particularly to people who are quite different from us.

I can stop God being gracious to others by keeping the Gospel to myself. By being reserved about God's welcome to others. By not sharing the Gospel. By applying *my* criteria to other people – not God's criteria – which is one of grace and love.

I can stop God being generous to myself. Its easy to *want* to earn God's favour. To want to feel that we are being rewarded. I live in an assessment and reward regime at the University. Everyone is assessed. Its all about performance.

But God says – I am a God who loves you. Full stop. But its so easy to say 'God loves me when ...' or 'God loves me if ...' But actually God simply loves me. I can easily say God only loves me when I'm good enough! God rewards me for good behaviour. I can *want* to stop God being generous to me.

But how does this Father respond to this older son who does not want the father to be gracious?

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'<sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

What do you notice?

'Son'!! Wow! Actually the word is not the normal word for son. Its more like 'My dear son'! Wow!

'You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours' Wow!

Why do we celebrate? This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

And of course, the Father in the parable is God. But the Father *also* represents Jesus. Jesus is acting for the Father. For Jesus is telling this parable to explain *his* ministry – to show

the Pharisees that although they are refusing to let God be gracious in and through Jesus' ministry, Jesus is still being gracious back! Jesus is God's grace in action.

And this Father comes from the banquet table to the courtyard and he pleads with the Son! The Father humiliates himself in costly love! The Father tolerates the total rudeness of the older son – and pleads with him! And still says, 'You are always with me'.

Remind you of anything? The humility of the Son on the Cross. The costly love of Jesus in dying for us. Jesus, the suffering servant.

But also the humility of the baby in the rugged manger – the nothingness of Jesus' birth, and becoming refugees and fleeing to Egypt. The birth is one with the cross. God has come *in person* to plead with us – to wait, to watch, to run, the plead ...

And what happens in the story? What does the older son do?

We don't know! No response is given. The parable doesn't have an ending!

We write the end of the parable! We are on stage by now. Drawn in by this amazing father and his incredible actions! How are we going to respond!

Will we join the party? And allow God to be gracious? Will we allow God to be gracious to others – and to us!

May it be so!

Amen