

"The Waiting Father"

Luke 15:11-31

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The parable of the "prodigal son", as it's usually called, is one of the most famous stories of the Bible, if not of our whole western culture. It's the gospel within a gospel, and it's powerful within any age and any culture. Still, the parable takes on a new power if we understand it in the setting of first century Roman Palestine, or Judea.

Jesus tells this parable along with one about a lost sheep and the shepherd who finds it, and about a lost coin and a woman who finds it. He's telling us in the three parables that people are lost and need finding, and that they can't save themselves without his intervention. The common factors in all three parables are the "lost-ness", and also God's great joy in the finding. In fact, Jesus says later in Luke his purpose is to save:

"The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."
 (Luke 19:10)

Now, why does he tell the parables at this point and to this audience? The Scribes and Pharisees were condemning Jesus, complaining about him. They were incensed that he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. What was the problem with that?

Two things you need to know about Middle Eastern culture; two cultural values that were true in Jesus' earthly career and still true today:

The first is hospitality.

Hospitality was extremely important in the Middle East, both for Jews and Arabs. Your honor was staked on being able to share hospitality with a guest. Not only that, but eating with someone implied total acceptance of another. Once you eat with someone, you share a special bond. It's why Jesus uses that as a picture of intimacy with his people in Revelation, when he says:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20)

You see this kind of bond in the movie, Lawrence of Arabia. When the British officer Lawrence eats in the tent with a Bedouin sheik, he comes under his protection. The sheik is now under obligation to him.

The second cultural value is avoiding shame.

That is why even today, there is a problem in the Muslim world with what is known as the "honor killing". That is when a member of the family will kill, with the approval of the family and the community, another member who has shamed the family name—say, when a young girl runs off with a young man rather than get married to the parents' approved choice of a mate. The family takes it on themselves to kill another family member in order to remove the source of shame.

That helps us see why Jesus' behavior was so scandalous to the religious leaders of the day. They thought he was bringing shame to God's name by associating with unclean people. He was seen as compromising God's reputation. Eating with sinners suggested approval, or complicity with sin. A holy God cannot associate with unholy people, and a prophet should know this! The Pharisees wanted to protect God's reputation. They were well motivated, but they thought that righteousness had to do with observing rules and regulations.

In the long run, it doesn't. Yes, God is holy, and he is in the business of making us holy. But obeying God is not a way to gain God's approval. The great mystery of the incarnation is that a holy God comes to live in the midst of *unholy* people. We do not make ourselves holy by living up to a code of behavior. Righteousness has to do with being in right *relationships*. So to make this clear, Jesus responds to his opponents' anger with a parable.

"There was a man who had two sons." (15:11)

The word "prodigal" means wastefully or recklessly extravagant, and this parable is usually called "The parable of the Prodigal Son." But it's really about two sons, and most of all, about a Father. Maybe the parable could be called the "Parable of the Prodigal Sons (plural)," or even "The Parable of the Prodigal Father," because he's reckless with his gifts, wasteful with grace. Jesus opens the parable by saying the subject is the Father—the character of this father who has two sons.

Now, the story starts when "the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them." (15:12)

What a request: in this culture, such a request would be utterly unheard of. I'm indebted here to New Testament scholar Ken Bailey. In his book *Through Peasant Eyes* he writes about this parable, and he says for a son to ask that would be saying he wants his father to die.

The younger son's request is more than rude. It is breaking his relationship with his father, because he is asking for what his father has the right to live on as long as he's alive. He's saying, "I don't want you, I just want what you have." He is deeply shaming his father by making the request.

How does the father respond? By picking up a stick and beating his son? By preserving the family honor that has been compromised or shamed? No, amazingly, he simply complies.

Why? Remember Jesus' reason for telling the story to the Pharisees, those saying, in effect, "You are shaming the name of God." Jesus tells the story to say, "If only you understood what God is like!" The Heavenly Father allows prodigal, profligate, wasteful sons and daughters to run away, to shame him, to squander what he has. His love is so big that he doesn't force himself. He lets the object of his love go.

"Not many days after, the younger son gathered all he had" (15:13)

The older son would have been the major heir, inheriting two thirds of his father's estate. The younger son would have been given one third. Notice the younger son gathers together his father's assets quickly. He has to—if he doesn't move quickly, the villagers will get him. He couldn't simply bring his credit card, or go to the bank to buy traveler's checks, but would have to go from place to place to liquidate his father's assets. And as he did so, the people would have been hissing at him, "Shame on you! Shame on you!" He had to get out of town quickly.

"...and set off for a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living." (11:13)

Far from the love and security of the father, that is. Far from that which was held as holy to the family. Far from everything sacred. Far from the responsibility of the family, and far, too, from the love and the security of the family.

Don't think that sin isn't costly. Jesus isn't glossing over the fact that the behavior of the younger son has caused real hurt, real brokenness in the family.

Jesus' hearers must have been hanging on every word here. To this point, they must have been scrutinizing him acutely, murmuring, "Yes, yes; that younger boy is the tax collectors and sinners!" The Pharisees and scribes must have been suspiciously waiting for the conclusion of the story.

"And when he had spend everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he gladly would have fed on the pods that the swine ate, and no one have him anything." (15:14-16)

The boy had hit rock bottom. He had lost everything in a time and place that had no safety net. He attaches himself to a local farmer, glomming into him in panic. The farmer probably didn't want him, because he gives him a job no Jew would take, that is, caring for the pigs. But in his desperation, the kid takes it.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger? I will arise and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father." (15:17-20)

What causes the boy to come to his senses? Maybe it's because he remembers the character of the father. Does he think, "Wait a minute! I know my father, and he'll forgive me!" And notice that when he turns, or repents, he there are three parts to his speech: "I have sinned; I'm not worthy; and treat me like one of your hired servants." It looks like he plans to work his way back into the father's household, to come back in under probation. But that's the one thing he cannot do. His sin is too deep, the shame too profound, and the damage done is irreparable. He can never make up for what he's done or replace what he has squandered.

"But while he was as yet at a distance his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." (15:20b)

This picture shows that the father has compassion. The word for it is "deeply moved." It's a very visceral word. It shows that the father is all torn up inside, waiting and watching, scanning the horizon for any sign of his son. And it shows that the father sees well who his son is. It's not blind love; he doesn't excuse sin, in fact he doesn't go to the far country to haul the boy home, but waits for him to make his way back. But he also sees from a long ways off the ragged but unmistakable image of his son limping home. The father isn't blind. He has great eyesight. He sees his son very well for who he is, filth and all.

How does the father respond to the vision of his son coming down the road? He runs! He runs, and in so doing, he is shaming himself. Kenneth Bailey shows us that mature men *never* run in public in the ancient Middle East. In order to run, a man has to lift the hem of his robe, exposing his undergarments. The father runs, because his heart is overflowing with joy, and maybe even because he has to get there ahead of the angry villagers. In the very act of embracing his son, the father transfers his son's shame to himself; what the villagers want to do to the son, Bailey writes, they must now do to the Father.

It would have been natural for the father to refuse his son. It would have been understandable if he had picked up a stick to give him the beating he deserved. But instead, he embraces his son, smothering him with kisses, covering him with forgiveness. The returning son is unclean! That's what the Pharisees are saying, that Jesus is making *himself* unclean with his eating with the "sinners".

"And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (15:21)

He needed to say those things. He needed to look at reality. He could not come back under the pretense that everything was okay, that the sin didn't really hurt the relationship. But he never got to the third part of his speech. He couldn't earn his way back in. It was utterly impossible, so the father interrupts before he can say, "make me like one of your hired hands." All the son could do was to come home.

"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him"—the *father's* robe; imagine, the Holy God covers our rags with his robe of holiness!

“And put a ring on his hand”—the father's authority; “And shoes on his feet”—shoes were for sons and daughters of the father, not slaves; “And bring the fatted calf and kill it, and celebrate; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (15:22-23)

How many people do you think could a calf feed? Not just the family, but also the village. This was not just a snack for a hungry son. The father was enfolding the son back into the family and *publicly* proclaiming with the feast that he was subsuming all the shame of the younger son.

But I told you it was a story of two sons...

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in." (15:25-28)

As the older son, he was responsible for hosting the party in his father's name. In front of the whole village, he shames his father again by refusing to play the role of a host. At the very least, he would have been expected to swallow his pride and play the role, then disagree with his father later in private. You never would humiliate the family by airing your dirty laundry in public! How will the father respond to this affront?

"His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look!'" (15:28b-29)

At least the younger brother had had the decency to call his father "Father", but the older brother insults him with a finger thrust in his face.

"These many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command."

Is that all it's been? Not that he's been in a relationship with his father, but that he's slaved for him? Not that he's loved him, but only has avoided breaking his command? And that, only shame him in public? There's no relationship here--there's already been a rupture like that between the younger son and the father, except the older son has simply continued to live in the same house.

"Yet you never gave me a kid that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!" (15:29b-30)

The older son makes it clear that his father's friends are not his friends; he makes it clear as well that he doesn't consider the younger son to be his brother. Again, how does the father respond?

"And he said to him, 'son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" (15:31-32)

Incredible grace! The father has simply subsumed the shame of the younger son, and now simply absorbs the shame of the older son. He makes an offer to come back into the circle of fellowship. The father's heart aches for a relationship with his older son, just as it does for the younger.

What is the older son's response to the overtures of his father? Does he melt into tears and fall into his father's arms, his heart broken with the overwhelming love? Does he ask forgiveness, so that the restoration can begin? Or, does he feel the family name has been so shamed, that the father has acted so scandalously, that he picks up a stick to beat his father?

We don't know. Our Lord leaves the story hanging there. We have to fill it in ourselves. But I'll tell you this: there's a *third* son of the parable. The younger *broke* his father's heart, and the older didn't *know* his father's heart. But there's another son *telling* the parable. He was God's Son. He never broke the Father's heart with sin, but he so knew the father's heart that he died to save sinners.

Think again of the audience. Of the Scribes and the Pharisees who listened to his message, some would believe, casting themselves on the mercy of the one who came in the name of the Father, taking him up on his invitation to come to the table of fellowship. But others would conspire against him, accuse him before the elders, spit upon him and have him beaten and nailed to a tree.

I know this: the Holy God embraces unholy sinners, and it's that embrace that makes them holy. His arms are wide enough to embrace us all. He spread them wide on the cross to absorb all the abuse an angry world could heap upon him, so that estranged sons and daughters could come home. He can absorb all our pain, all our sin, all our brokenness, all our lost-ness, and can restore us to himself as his own sons and daughters. Won't you let him do that? And will you rejoice at the others God is bringing into the family? Because whether you're the younger prodigal or the older one, Jesus' arms are open to enfold you in his embrace. Receive his surprising and costly love today.