

The Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's probably the richest of all Jesus' parables. This parable is actually 3rd in a series of 3 parables. At the beginning of ch15 of Luke, the good religious folks are giving Jesus a hard time because he hangs out with sinners. In response to these accusations, Jesus tells three parables that reflect God's love for sinners.

First, he tells the parable of the lost and found sheep, comparing God to a shepherd who will leave his 99 sheep behind in order to search for one lost sheep.

Then he tells the parable of the lost and found coin, comparing God to a woman with 10 silver coins who will turn the house upside down in order to find the one that is lost.

And then, Jesus begins the Parable of the Lost and Found Son, comparing God to the most loving and forgiving image of a father anywhere in scripture.

Actually, the parable contains 2 lost and found sons. We think of the younger son, the so-called Prodigal son as the lost son. Yet, the older brother is just as lost as his younger brother. But that's a whole different sermon. Besides, the focal point of the parable is the love of the father, and how that is a picture of God's love for us.

Now, we might sympathize with the younger son. Those of you who have survived your teenage years probably remember some of the feelings of wanting to spread your wings and fly. I suspect that while you lived at home, you might have felt shackled and restrained, like you couldn't wait to leave home, and get out in the world, to be able to do what you wanted to when you wanted to. But we need to place those feelings aside to really understand the cultural context of this parable.

Because Jesus' audience would feel absolutely no sympathy for the younger son. Zip, zero, nada.

The younger son asks his father for his share of inheritance early.¹ In that culture, this a very insulting thing. He's thumbing his nose at his dad. It's basically saying to the father, 'I wish you were dead,' or 'you're as good as dead to me already.'

In fact, in the light of such an insult, the community would expect the father to literally kick the boy's rear end, to try to knock some sense into him.

But that's not the father's response. Even though the request is highly insulting, the father gives his son the inheritance that would usually come to him only after the father's death. The father allows his son to make his own decisions and lead his own life.

In the same way, we have to remember that our Heavenly Father acts the same way. God is not a puppeteer. He allows us to make free moral choices in life. Even if our choices are insulting to him... Even if they create separation and distance, God still gives us the freedom to act as we choose.

¹ Lk 15:12

In the parable, the Father gives his son that same type of freedom, even though the son has insulted him terribly.

Now, you might say, "So he insults his father. Big deal." Don't forget, Jesus lives in a culture where honor is always VERY serious. Jesus' culture was VERY sensitive to issues of honor and shame.

The son dishonors his father. That would mean that in the extended family, and in the village, he would be persona non grata. Since the son rejected his father, the whole community would shun and reject him. That was the way things worked.

So, the younger son decides to leave pretty quickly. He's burnt his bridges with his family and with the community he grew up in. So he leaves the small town and goes off to the big city. And there, we're told, he blows his whole bankroll on what is termed, "dissolute living."²

Now this could refer to really wild and sinful living. "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Or it could refer simply to extravagant living, burning through his assets like there's no tomorrow. Either way, the son is trying to feel important by spending his money. He's trying to enjoy life on purely materialistic terms. He's already broken all the relationships he ever had. So now he's looking for greener pastures elsewhere.

In this way, I think the son is a lot like us. We often think that the grass looks greener somewhere else. When we're dissatisfied as teenagers, we think, "If I can just be on my own, everything will be perfect." Unfortunately, as adults, we often fall into the same trap. "If I could just get a different job, my life will have meaning. If I could just trade in my boring spouse for someone else who's more exciting, then my life will be fulfilled. If I could just move away, I'd be happy."

But usually that's not the way it works. Because external changes never change the way we are on the inside. Wherever you go, you always take yourself along. You can't escape from yourself.

And that's what the young son soon discovers. Life in the fast lane doesn't work out. And he's more miserable than ever.

He runs out of money. And at the same time the economy takes a dive. And he has no friends, no family, no support system. But he still tries to be self-reliant. So he hires himself out to a pig farmer. For a Jewish boy, you can't sink any lower than this. This is rock bottom. And he's so hungry, that even the pig food looks good to him, even though those carob pods make lousy food for human beings.³

² Lk 15:13

³ Lk 15:14-16

But then while he's at rock bottom, he has a sudden flash of insight. 'My father's servants live much better than this. I'll go back home. I'll live as one of my father's hired hands.'⁴ But notice, he's doing this for selfish reasons. His confession sounds pretty good on the surface, but it really rings hollow. Don't forget why he's going back. The bottom line is he's hungry. Survival is his primary motivation here.

But that's good news for us. Repentance doesn't require perfection. It simply requires being willing to turn back to God, even for the poorest of motives on our part. We just have to make the first steps back, and God does the rest.

And that's the glorious good news of this parable.

Jesus says, "He set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."⁵

The younger son had shamed his father publicly. He had humiliated him by his actions. And yet, the father doesn't hold this against him. Instead, the father runs out to greet his son and embrace him and kiss him.

Don't miss the importance of what's happening here. If the father had not run out, the son would have had to walk through the village alone. He would have had to endure all the cold stares, all the disgusted looks. But the father runs after his son.

And this is VERY undignified behavior in that culture. The neighbors would have been shocked. There was a saying: "Great men never run in public." It was unseemly. Besides, the father would have been dressed somewhat like I am. To run he would have had to lift his robe and expose his legs publicly, which would have been shameful and silly in that culture. But the father is willing to endure public shame himself, in order to welcome his son.

Given his status, the father was also supposed to be reserved in his display of emotion, especially toward someone who had done him wrong. But, again the father doesn't care what the neighbors will think. He embraces his son, and kisses him.

We usually miss the significance of this piece of the story because of our different cultural context. But people in poorer and more rural cultures get it. One scholar of Christianity in the Third World says that even today, Christians in African villages are mystified by the Father's behavior. He writes,

"Like the residents of ancient Galilee, modern African villagers understand the temptations of migrating to the city, and the hazards. (However) what they do find mind-boggling (about this parable) is the father's willingness to take back a son who had so abominably ignored his family obligations, the same kind of amazement that Jesus presumably intended to stir among his original listeners."⁶

⁴ Lk 15:17

⁵ Lk 15:20

⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, p.70

In other words, the father's behavior is completely unexpected. It's completely different from what his culture expects. And that's precisely the point. It's so important.

To spare his son from humiliation, the father is willing to be humiliated himself. Right there, in the middle of this parable, in the middle of this reunion, the meaning of the cross appears.

The message is this: God is willing to go the extra mile. God is willing to take on shame and humiliation, and even death itself, to save us from shame and humiliation, and the consequences of our sin, our bad choices in life. That's what God does for us, nailing our sin to the cross.

And then, the father goes ever further. To make sure the neighbors understand, the father orders that the boy be dressed as his son. His son has been covered with the filth of the pig sty. But now his father covers him with the symbols of sonship: robe, ring, and sandals. And then he orders the slaughter of the grain fed calf, the one that was saved for special occasions, the one that could feed the whole village. And he throws a big party for his son who had returned.⁷ Again, this points to God, who covers our sin, clothes us in Jesus' righteousness, and invites us to the feast as his sons and daughters.

The parable is not really about the son. The parable is about the father's love for him. This parable is about our Father's love for us.

While he was a long way off, the father ran to him.
"While we still were sinners, Christ died for us."⁸

To save his son from humiliation, the father endured shame.
To save us, Jesus "endured the cross, disregarding its shame."⁹

The son was clothed in the father's robe and led into the banquet hall.
We are clothed in Christ's righteousness, and given the right to feast at the banquet prepared for us.

That's the kind of love the father shows for his son.
That's the kind of love our Father has for us.

⁷ Lk 15:22-24

⁸ Rom 5:8

⁹ Heb 12:2