

Stories with a Purpose:
The Parables of Jesus, #4

The Prodigal Son Luke 15:11-32

--CEFC 2/10/19; 4/5/09
(cf. NEFC 12/9/90)

If there is one thing we learn from reading the Gospels
it is that religion can be dangerous to your spiritual health.
In fact, it can be deadly.

Think about it—
who were the people who were most scandalized by the ministry of Jesus?
They were the religious people—
the scribes and Pharisees, the teachers of the law.

Who were the objects of Jesus harshest words of condemnation?
They were the religious people—
those who were sure of their own righteousness.

Who took the lead in seeing that Jesus ended up on a cross?
They were the religious people--
They stirred up the crowds to cry "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And why was that?
Quite simply because they believed that what Jesus
was upsetting the way the world was supposed to be.
He was saying and doing things
just weren't fair.
It wasn't right,
Jesus didn't deal with people as they deserved.

The kingdom Jesus came to bring
turned the moral order of the universe upside down.

We looked at that a couple of weeks ago
in the story Jesus told about some workers in a vineyard.
The owner of the vineyard paid the people who had only worked one hour
the same as those who worked the whole day.

The people who were hired first
were pretty upset and began to grumble against the boss—
"We worked in the heat all day and we get the same as they do?
It's not fair!"

"What's not fair about it?" he responded.
"You got your one denarius.
Isn't this what you agreed to?
Are you envious because I happen to be generous?" (Mt. 20:1-15).

This is just what Jesus seemed to be doing—
acting like this landowner,
lavishly pouring out his blessing on those who had no right to it—
and the religious people didn't like it one bit—
What kind of world could Jesus be talking about?

The scandal of Jesus' ministry is captured in the first two verses of Luke 15—
**"Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him.
But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered,
"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."**

The Pharisees and scribes were outraged
because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them.

I used to think that in our age of moral indifference and rigidly enforced tolerance
such an occurrence would hardly engender a violent reaction from anybody;
But I'm not so sure anymore.
Just think of the reaction today if Jesus fraternized with members of the Ku Klux Klan
and had his picture taken with one of them.

Eating with tax collectors and "sinners" was a serious matter.

You see, in the Jewish society of the first century,
table fellowship was carefully protected to reflect social and religious boundaries.

By the blessing at the meal's outset and the responding 'amen' said by the participants,
meals were given a religious dimension.

Those who ate at the table were joined together, in a sense,
in the sight of God.

By eating together, they all had a share in the blessing,
and by implication they all acknowledged their mutual acceptance by God.

So we can understand, for example, the Apostle Paul's hostility toward Peter,
when he tells us that before certain men
from the strict Jewish-Christian circumcision group came to Antioch
Peter used to eat with the Gentile believers.

But when they arrived he began to draw back
and separate himself from the Gentiles in the church,
leading others to do the same.

Table fellowship was the chief sign of acceptance and of a bond of unity,
a unity that Peter, in Paul's opinion, had unnecessarily broken.

For the Jews, it was through table fellowship
that the ritual distinction of clean and unclean
and the moral distinction of the righteous and sinners
found concrete social expression.¹

¹ Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, p. 159.

Jews were not to eat with Gentiles because they were unclean,
and their uncleanness was contagious, almost like a child's chickenpox.

And this basic understanding was used to make distinctions based on moral categories
within Judaism, too.

So those despised tax-collectors and the morally repulsive prostitutes
would never be accepted at a gathering of the righteous.

And in the view of some,

anyone who did not hold to a rigorous life of torah obedience
was forbidden company at the dinner table.

But Jesus didn't operate by these rules.

He invented his own.

He didn't seem to respect these neat distinctions between the clean and the unclean;
after all, he touched a leper.

He was uncouth, an ill-mannered Galilean,
who didn't respect this fundamental division
between the righteous and sinners—
he welcomed publicans and prostitutes and ate with them.

This wasn't just a breach of social etiquette—

it was social subversion,

It was a scandal to the religious mind.

It wasn't right.

It wasn't fair.

People only get what they deserve.

How dare he welcome sinners and eat with them. /

"But don't you see," Jesus told them, "This is what God is like."

And he told them first a story about a faithful shepherd
who leaves behind his 99 sheep to go out looking for one lost sheep.

And another about a diligent housekeeper

who sweeps the whole house looking for one lost coin.

And in each case, when the sheep is rescued or the coin is found
there is cause for a great celebration.

**"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God
over one sinner who repents,"** Jesus says (Lk. 15:10).

That's the context to this famous story I want us to look at—

a familiar story, whose very familiarity may cause us to miss its main point. /

Luke 15:11—

"There was a man who had two sons."

The action of the story begins when the younger son

demands his inheritance while his father is still living--
an insulting request, to say the least—
basically saying, "I wish you were dead!"
He gets the money and immediately leaves home
and goes off to a distant country
where he squanders his wealth in wild living.

Unfortunately for him, the economy goes bad--

v. 14—"After he had spent everything,
there was a severe famine in that whole country,
and he began to be in need.
So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country,
who sent him to his fields to feed pigs."

Think about it—

making a living by slopping pigs

is just about the worst thing imaginable for any self-respecting Jew.

And he was hungry.

"He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating,
but no one gave him anything."

And in that sorry state, this young man finally comes to realize how foolish he's been.

He "**comes to his senses**," Jesus says.

Literally, he comes "*to himself*."

It dawns upon him;

The light comes on.

Reality bursts into his consciousness.

'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare,
and here I am starving to death!
I will set out and go back to my father and say to him:
Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.
I am no longer worthy to be called your son;
make me like one of your hired men.'
So he got up and went to his father."

But you know what happens—

"while the son was still a long way off,
his father saw him and was filled with compassion;"

This father had been humiliated by the behavior of his son--

he had been insulted and must have been deeply hurt.

His reputation in the community had been defamed.

But rather than seeking vindication and retribution against his son,

the father absorbed that pain himself.

"his father saw him while the son was still a long way off"—

The implication is that the father was still looking for him to come back—
he never gave up on his son.

More than that, the father "**ran out**" to greet his son—

a rather undignified thing for a wealthy Jewish man to do.

And by doing so, he spares his son the humiliation and derision
he may well have encountered as he walked through the village.

The father took all that shame upon himself,
by setting aside his own pride and honor,
and leaving his home to run to meet his son.

And before the repentant son can even deliver his well-rehearsed speech,
the father embraces his son and kisses him.

v. 21—then **"The son says to him,
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"**

But the father immediately calls on his servants to lavish his son
with the symbols of love and acceptance—
the robe of honor on his shoulders
and a ring of authority on his finger.
He restores his son's dignity by placing sandals on his bare feet.

"Go, slaughter the fattened calf," he says. **"This calls for a great celebration—
my lost son has returned.
He was dead, but now he is alive again."**

Notice the contrast here--

v.16 is a picture of total rejection--
in that distant country **"no one gave him anything."**
v.22ff presents a picture of total acceptance--
his father gave him everything. ///

What love!

What grace is displayed here!
What undeserved acceptance!

This son had forfeited any claim he might have on his father's love
and he knew it--
"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

How easily his father might have sent him to the servants' quarters,
if he allowed him to enter his household at all.
How natural it would have been for the father to respond
with anger and bitterness and harsh punishment.

But Jesus is telling us about a different kind of love--
a divine love—a love that is full of grace—
that undeserved favor.

One might even call it a "prodigal" grace—
for the word "prodigal" means recklessly extravagant,
lavishly generous,
abounding and abundant.

And that's what it was—

a prodigal grace toward this prodigal son.

It's a wonderful story.

Just imagine how that son felt—
after the anguish that he had caused his father;
after the shame of his own foolishness;
after the guilt of his own debauchery—
in a moment, his father wiped all that away—
he was accepted,
he was forgiven,
he was loved despite all that he had done.

Is such grace possible?
Or are we forever prisoners of our wayward past,
forever condemned for our foolish and sinful actions.
Is there no freedom from our guilt and shame?

Jesus says there is—
for this is what God is like.
The God and Father of Jesus Christ
is himself a friend of tax collectors and sinner—
he receives all who come to themselves
and come home to him with no claim,
seeking only his mercy.

This is who God is according to Jesus—
a God of prodigal grace
toward all those willing to accept it.

God is like a loving father
who wants a relationship with us
as his own sons and daughters,
and he is willing to leave his home in humility and love
to make that possible.

In Jesus Christ, that is just what God has done—
like a shepherd looking for that lost sheep;
like the woman looking for the lost coin;
like that father embracing his lost son,
God himself has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Such is his grace.
And that grace is available to all who are willing to come to their senses
and simply come home to the father who will run to meet them.

How about you?
Have you been wandering in a faraway country—
Has your money run out yet?
Jesus says, come home to a loving father,
and when you do, the angels in heaven will rejoice. ///

But I want you to see that that's not the end of it.
This father had two sons, remember.

Jesus continues—

v. 25--“**Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.**

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

‘Your brother has come,’ he replied,

‘and your father has killed the fattened calf

because he has him back safe and sound.’

That father had two sons—

and both of them were lost.

Only, the second one—the older one—he didn't know it.

That was his problem.

For, you see, he was a very dutiful son, a righteous son.

He was conscientious.

He was responsible.

He always obeyed his father.

He always followed the rules—he was the “**good**” son.

So quite naturally, he expected to receive the father's blessing.

He deserved it, you see.

So when he heard music and dancing,

and was told that it was a celebration for his wayward younger brother,

he was incensed.

That brother who had been so selfish,

so rebellious,

so embarrassing to the family honor—

why would anyone ever celebrate him?

The father was holding a great feast,

which would have included the whole village,

but the older brother first insults his father

simply by refusing to join in.

Again, the father humbles himself in going out to his son—

and he pleaded with him to join in the feast.

But the older brother views his father's mercy and compassion

toward his **younger** brother

as an act of injustice toward him,

and he is angry.

Instead of some respectful address to his father, he simply says,

“**Look!**” (ἰδοὺ) “Listen to me, you . . .”

“**all these years I've been slaving for you**

and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat

so I could celebrate with my friends.
But when this son of yours"--
notice, he doesn't refer to him as his brother at all—
he had disowned him long ago!
'But when this son of yours
who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home,
you kill the fattened calf for him!'

Yes, this son was lost, too.
But he didn't see it that way.

Both sons had gone to a far-away country--
one physically, the other emotionally.
For the older son didn't relate to his father as a father at all—
he was just his slave master to be obeyed,
rather than a father to be loved. /

But notice, the father responds to the older son
just as he had to the younger--
He extends to him the same fatherly love—
he goes out to him, swallowing his own pride--
"My son,' the father said,
'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.
But we had to celebrate and be glad,
because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again;
he was lost and is found.'"

He urges his son to come and join him in the celebration,
but, quite abruptly,
there the story ends.

The younger son had returned,
but at the end of the story, the older one was still outside,
brooding and fuming.

We don't know if he continued
in his jealousy and his stubborn refusal to accept his father's gracious love,
or if he followed the lead of his brother,
and came to his senses and joined in the festivities.

It's open-ended, you see--
It's open-ended precisely because the final scene had yet to be written.

It was a scene that Jesus' Jewish listeners would have to write for themselves.
The lost were being found—
"sinners" were eating joyously with Jesus.
But would his listeners, these Pharisees and teachers of the law,
enter into that joy?
That's the question.

Let's get back to where we began—
Religion can be dangerous to your spiritual health—
in fact, it can be deadly.

Both brothers were selfish and self-centered, but in opposite ways--
the younger brother was impulsive and licentious,
indulging his own lusts.

Tim Keller in his exposition of this passage,
suggests that we might call him the Progressive.²
Life was about self-discovery and self-expression;
it was about exploring alternative life-styles,
pushing the envelope,
striving for liberation from all the cultural restraints
that come through custom and convention.

He was open-minded and tolerant of everyone,
except perhaps to those he judged to be closed-minded and intolerant.
He wanted to be liberated,
free from authority,
free to actualize his own identity.

But in the end, the only thing he actualized was a hungry stomach
and a lonely soul. /

In contrast, the older son was restrained and legalistic.
We might call him the Conservative.

He had a high regard for the order that came through social and moral tradition.
Those who differed from his view of the world
were dangerous threats to that order.

He devoted himself to his father's service--
but as a slave rather than as a son.

In the end he was left angry and also alone.

Both were rebels against the father's love--
Both broke the father's heart.³

But the older brother, he didn't see it—
it was hidden to him.
he considered himself upright and honorable,
but he was blind to his own selfishness and self-righteousness.
It was, in fact, his moral uprightness that kept him from seeing the truth.

He may have been obedient, but it was only to serve himself.
He wanted the father's property just as much as his younger brother,
he was just using a different method to get it—

² This analogy and contrast is suggested by Tim Keller in his book *The Prodigal God*.

³Bailey, p. 203.

he was using morality—and religion even—
as a tool of self interest.

Keller tells a story that illustrates this—

"Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot.
So he took it to his king and said,
"My lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow.
Therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you."

The king was touched and discerned the man's heart,
so as he turned to go, the king said, "Wait!
You are clearly a good steward of the earth.
I own a plot of land right next to yours.
I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all."
And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this.
And he said, "My! If that is what you get for a carrot—
what if you gave the king something better?"
So the next day the nobleman came before the king,
and he was leading a handsome black stallion.
He bowed low and said, "My lord, I breed horses
and this is the greatest horse I've ever bred or ever will.
Therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you."

But the king discerned his heart and said thank you,
and took the horse and merely dismissed him.
The nobleman was perplexed.
So the king said, "Let me explain.
That gardener was giving me the carrot,
but you were giving yourself the horse."⁴

How much of our moralism—
our good behavior,
our religious exercises,
our doing good to the poor and our service of the needy,
how much of that is really just for ourselves?

Churches can be full of older brothers, you know—
moralistic religion is the default mode of the human heart.

Moralistic religion says "If I obey, God will accept me."
The gospel says, "God accepts me, so I will obey."
There is all the difference in the world between these two.

⁴*Prodigal God*, pp. 60-62.

Many Christians begin by understanding this good news of the gospel,
but then they fall back into that moralistic mode.
They get judgmental with the tax collectors and sinners who don't fall in line.
They get angry when God doesn't give them what they want—
for they've worked hard to deserve God's blessing.
They are unforgiving toward others
because they've forgotten how much God has forgiven them.
They start out amazed at God's grace,
but then they fall back into thinking they have to earn God's love.
They become older brothers.

Jesus knew the deceptiveness of the human heart--
a duplicity that hides all sorts of hypocrisy.

For deep down inside, we think that by being religious, being moral,
we can put God in our debt.
If we do all sorts of good things, he will owe us something.
That's how it works, doesn't it?

And when God seems to pass out his blessings to mere sinners
our sense of fairness gets offended.

What about me?
"I've been slaving for you all this time.
I have never disobeyed your orders.
What's in it for me?"

That obedient older brother
is not concerned about living in a loving relationship with the father
any more than that profligate younger brother.

But older brothers don't see it that way.
They don't see that they have a problem—
they don't understand their real sickness—
they appear to have all the signs of health—
and that's exactly what makes moralistic religion so dangerous.

Jesus seems to be saying that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him
by throwing off all the rules
or by obeying them diligently.⁵

The religious may have a cancer eating away at their soul,
but they can't see it.
They seem to be getting along quite well.
So they don't seek the one doctor who alone can cure them.
Without a sense of their own sin,

⁵Cf. Keller, *Prodigal God*, p. 37.

they feel no need of a Savior.

Sin, as the Bible defines it, is not just breaking the rules—
it's putting ourselves in the place of God.
It's our trying to live apart from God,
and sometimes that may mean obeying the rules
so that we can manipulate God.

Here's the point Jesus is making—
we're all lost,
we're all away from home, alienated from the father.

We're all lost,
and only when we understand that
and accept that the Father stands willing to welcome us
simply by our turning to him with empty hands in faith,
will we ever escape the deadly trap of religion.

Religion, moralism, is about my good works.
The God whom **Jesus** reveals is about grace—a prodigal grace,
a recklessly extravagant and abundant grace—
a grace that exceeds anything we can imagine.

God's grace is extravagant—there's nothing fair about it.
It can't be fair, because nobody deserves it—nobody.
And especially me—I know I don't deserve it.

Can you say that?
You must.

You must, because there is a father who longs to invite you into his feast—
he wants you to share in his joy.
He wants to love you as his own son or daughter.
Don't let your past get in the way.
Don't let your religion harden your heart.

Prayer—

Closing Song: *Grace Flows Down*

Benediction:
2Ths. 2:16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father,
who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,
encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

**Stories with a Purpose:
Studies in the Parables of Jesus, #4**

“The Prodigal Son” Luke 15:11-32

Jesus scandalized the religious world of his day in the way he presented the character of God. His grace is extravagant! This powerful story conveys the different ways we can be lost, and the way to be found.

- **The Scandal of Jesus’ Ministry**
- **A Prodigal Son Who Receives Prodigal Grace**
- **A Dutiful Son Who Refuses the Father’s Love**
- **Beware of “Older Brother” Religion**
- **Receive the Extravagant Grace of Our God!**

Sermon Response:

The Prodigal Son
Luke 15:11-32

- Why were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law so offended by Jesus?
- How can religion be dangerous? What can protect you from dangerous religion?
- Which of the sons do you more easily identify? Why?
- What is it about this notion of “prodigal grace” that you find difficult to grasp and to internalize?
- We seem to be living in a very moralist culture when it comes to a very narrow selection of offenses, with a zero-tolerance policy and no possibility of forgiveness and restoration. What aspects of this are similar to or differ from the biblical conceptions of sin, judgment, grace, forgiveness and restoration?