

The Parables of Jesus: The Prodigal Son

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Date: 06 June 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'm going to say something weird now, but you'll get used to it over the coming weeks. Because we're going to have these sermons on the phone line and other avenues, I'm going to tag it with the date. So welcome here on this Sunday, June 6th.

I want to test your memories a bit this morning. Man, have I ever missed audience participation? You've heard me talk about it probably over the months online, but we actually get to do it.

So have you considered in the past what it means to receive God's grace? Well, at one point in our series on the characteristics of God, we considered that God is merciful and just.

Do you remember those characteristics that we explored together? So with all of that in mind, I want to test your memories a bit this morning with some audience participation. And speaking of grace, I promise to extend some here.

Okay, are you ready? Getting what we deserve is called? Ah, Len. Not getting what we deserve is called?

[1 : 0 7] Oh, you guys are good. And getting what we do not deserve is called? Nice.

You don't even need me. I'm going to go now. So I want you to keep these concepts in mind as we continue in this, in our sermon series on the parables of Jesus this morning. And as Len said, that last song that we closed with, ancient words, these ancient words of Jesus, we're talking about them now.

It's fantastic to me. It's amazing that through centuries and centuries of time, these words of Jesus remain true to us. And throughout this series, as you've heard me say before, we've looked at some familiar stories, some that you know well, and perhaps some of these parables that are maybe relatively less familiar to you, or maybe they're brand new.

And so, as I've said before, my prayer for us in this series is that God grants us the eyes to see and the ears to hear the truth of these parables of Jesus, these stories that he told.

There are a few of Jesus' parables that have seemed to resonate more broadly with people throughout history. And some of these stories have even become a part, I believe, of the shared human experience.

[2 : 3 0] And I believe that's largely because the themes of them resonate across cultures, across belief systems, across time. And I've also suggested that some of these parables that we've been exploring together in this series may be very familiar to you.

Well, this morning we're going to be looking at what is likely one of Jesus' best known parables. As we consider the parable of, gave it away already, the prodigal son.

Do you have a sense of what the word prodigal means? And you don't have to respond to that. So I did some homework, because that's what I'm supposed to do.

Used as an adjective, the Oxford Dictionary defines prodigal as spending money or resources freely or recklessly, wasteful or extravagant.

When used as a noun, prodigal is defined as a person who spends recklessly. So it's interesting to note that that word, if you use that word, someone's, wow, that's prodigal behavior.

[3 : 44] The word is actually defined by the story here. Defined by the details of the story, the behavior that we see in this very story.

So this is not a trick question. But before we read this story, before we look through it together, I want you to consider from your understanding in the past, who is this story about?

Who behaved badly? Did everyone get what they deserved in one way or another? And have you actually thought about, maybe you haven't, and that's okay too.

Have you actually thought about what Jesus was getting at with this story? What was his point? Well, this parable falls into the category, and we've looked at a few of these in the past couple of weeks, the category of salvation.

So this is a story, again, that Jesus told about the circumstances and perspectives on being saved. Being saved from sin and entering into a relationship with God through Jesus.

[4 : 53] And as you can see on the screen, parable of the prodigal son is found in Luke 15, verses 11 to 32. So turn to it in your Bibles if you have them with you.

Open your Bible app on your phone, or you can listen as I read. It begins with Jesus in mid-thought. And that'll make sense next week, because I'm going to go backwards next week.

Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate.

So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son gathered all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

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.

[5 : 57] He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death.

I'll set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm 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 while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But then after he said to his servants, Sorry, I missed something there. He said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

[7 : 03] Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate, for the son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. 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.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, 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, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

[8 : 11] 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. Amen. The prodigal son. It's quite a well-known story, actually.

Many books have been written about it. Many, many books, in fact, have been written about the story itself, written about the themes that are reflected in this story. And not just Christian books.

This is a familiar theme throughout human awareness, it seems. There's a famous painting. Perhaps you know of it. I love the image. I should have put it up, but I didn't.

There's a famous painting, and it's called The Return of the Prodigal Son, and it's painted by Rembrandt. And it is a famous, well-known painting. It depicts that reunion scene between the young son and the father.

[9 : 14] The themes of the prodigal son can be seen throughout popular culture. Maybe you've been watching a TV show or gotten a sense of this reconciliation theme that's there.

But what is it about this story that resonates with us so deeply? Well, I believe it's because of these themes that we reflected on when we began this morning.

Justice. Mercy. And grace. So I'm going to make a bit of an assumption this morning. Never a good thing to do, but I'm going to do it anyway.

I'm going to assume that this story is not familiar, or is not new to you, pardon me. So I'm not going to go into a bunch of unpacking, because I believe you know it.

And that it's at least in some ways not unfamiliar to you. For many of you, as I look out, I'm sure it is very familiar to you. Is that okay with everyone that I do that? Make that unfair, yet hopefully godly assumption?

[10 : 17] All right. Story of the prodigal son isn't one that I imagine Jesus telling as his audience just sat peacefully, quietly listening.

And I'll explain why I think that. Have you ever seen a Punch and Judy puppet show? There are passionate reactions. There are cheers.

There are boos, right? Even some of Shakespeare's plays, if you've seen them performed live, they receive this kind of passionate reaction from people who watch them.

And I believe that is the intention. That's what I imagine the audience's reaction would have been like when Jesus told this story. But why? Well, this story and the way it ultimately plays out would have totally defied people's expectations.

It would have turned their judgments and their preconceptions right upside down. A son demanding his inheritance from his father?

[11 : 25] Shocking. Super shocking. Demanding his inheritance before his father was even dead? My friends, that's equivalent to saying, you die so that I can get my money.

That's pretty cold, right? It's equivalent to him saying he wished his father was dead so that he would write the check. And then to go off and blow that inheritance, blow his family's legacy, his father's hard work, his father's reputation, and my goodness, in a foreign country, no less?

Scandalous. Scandalous. Super scandalous. Jesus' audience, Luke's contemporary readers, it's written in the Gospel of Luke, right?

Recorded there. Would have been disgusted and horrified by most of this. Boos and hisses. Imagine that next time you read it. It's more fun. But I don't know about you, but I've always had just even a little bit of sympathy for the younger brother.

Just a little bit. When he found himself broke, he was broke, he was far from home, and then he was in the middle of a famine to boot, right? Talk about adding insult to injury.

[12 : 40] Sure, I mean, he made bad decisions, right? We can all recognize that, but haven't we all done that? Made bad decisions? We read that he tried to find work. He was even willing to work with pigs.

And again, wow, a first century Jewish audience would have been horrified. This is the worst possible job a person could have.

Working with pigs, unclean animals, not a good scene, right? That's horrible for them. They would have, but, we can also recognize they would have probably cheered at that.

Talk about justice, right? So this little rotten son of his goes off and blows all of these things. Well, working with pigs, there you go, there's your payback, my friend.

So in their eyes, the younger son would have, what? Deserved this, right? This is judgment. This is retribution.

[13 : 43] After all he had done, this, working with pigs, would have been justice. Stranded in a foreign land with not a penny to his name, justice. He should be made to suffer.

He should have to grovel and beg and be punished. And likely never have a shot at getting anything good ever again. That's payback, right?

Can you recognize that kind of justice in our own hearts and minds sometimes, in our own society sometimes? So we're seeing familiar themes here again.

Maybe you can recognize that. The themes of judgment. And what our idea of judgment or fair payback may be in comparison with God's idea of that.

We read that the younger son seems to practice his groveling speech. Did you notice that? The speech he plans to use on his dad to try and get back into his good graces.

[14 : 44] And I believe that he may have actually had a change of heart or a change of mind at that point when he figures out what he's going to say. But as I studied it again, something else kind of came to my mind.

There's also, I believe, a reasonable possibility here that the son is still trying to get his dad. Still trying to pull, put one over on him a little bit.

Simply, if you look at it, if you, sorry, allergies, if you look at it again and you look at it closely, not only is he rehearsing this speech, but maybe he knows what his father would want to hear and he's making sure he ticks all the boxes.

There's a bit of a vibe of that there too. Can you imagine him practicing this speech looking at his own reflection in the pig water trough? No mirrors, right?

So, looking at his reflection, practicing the gee, dad, I'm really sorry speech. We read in verse 17 though that he came to his senses.

[15 : 54] That's what scripture says there. But this may simply have been that he recognized maybe he could just manage to get hired on as a laborer, right? He says that his father fed his laborers better.

They probably had food to spare. So, if he could just get back in, just get a part-time job working in the fields, he'd still eat better than the pigs.

So, whatever the son's motivation was, he went home. We know that. And here's another event in this story that would have defied expectations.

Because we read that the father saw the son from a long way off before he was even home. And he did what? He ran to him.

Wow. Distinguished, wealthy, older men of a certain station of life in that culture and the time this story would have been told, friends, did not run.

[17 : 12] Imagine an older man, imagine your image of Moses running in a robe. wouldn't have been that dignified? Might not have been a pretty sight. But yet the father did not hide his joy, didn't hide his love, didn't hide his relief.

He ran. We read, he hugged, he kissed. Oh, for those days to come back, they will. He ran and hugged and kissed his son.

There was no resistance, no reluctance, no sense of accounting or a sense that accounting was to be done or something was owed.

We simply see pure joy registered in this restored relationship, this connection. There's no debt to be paid here. There's no sense of human justice to be acted out for this relationship to be restored.

There isn't even a sense of hesitation before the father celebrates. Again, though, the way this story plays out, the father's clearly unexpected and upside down reaction, listeners and readers would have been speechless.

[18 : 36] Everything about this story would have been scandalous and shocking and reckless. There's a song we sang at camp that talked about the reckless love of God.

We don't deserve it. We can't earn it. I got to move on before I completely lose it. But that's it, right?

What would have been expected? What would have been reasonable? Well, the reaction of the older brother, right? That would have been reasonable.

Of course, he would have had every reason, the older brother, to feel insulted. He worked harder. He deserved more, in his opinion. He was loyal and he followed the rules.

Doesn't that sound to you a bit like some workers in a certain vineyard? or perhaps a religious leader who seemed holy enough as he prayed in the temple and yet chose to judge the man praying next to him?

[19 : 47] And we know how those stories played out, don't we? We've looked at them in this series as well. This sense of justice or fairness, it can often be motivated by self-interest or a misdirected sense of entitlement.

And we've come to recognize just how dangerous it can be to lean into our own sense of righteousness or to be critical or judgmental of other people.

I hope we've begun to recognize that. And maybe somehow we see that reaction of the older son as being justified. But it doesn't take much time to also recognize that his loyalty, his obedience, were ultimately selfishly motivated, weren't they?

When we began this morning, I outlined a few focused questions, if you remember. I asked us to reflect on who is this story about?

Who behaved badly? Did everyone get what they deserved? believed? And have you thought in the past about what Jesus was getting at with this one?

[21 : 06] Were you able to recognize that the core of this story actually doesn't reflect on the sons at all, but on the consistent and loving, the utterly grace-filled response of the father?

father? We are absolutely intended to recognize the behavior of the two brothers, and it's not surprising that many people see them as contrasts between good son and bad son.

I can remember having that view of this parable for a long time. Well, he was good. He stayed and followed the rules. He was bad. He ran away. But there's more to it than that, and I hope you've begun to see that.

Can you recognize that the behavior that we see in them, neither willful, selfish disregard, nor selfishly motivated commitment are desirable?

Neither one. So my friends, my question for us this morning is, which child are you? Are you the child who wants every blessing that God has to offer you?

[22 : 21] But you're not ultimately all that interested in what he wants for your life, or how he might be calling you to serve him? Or are you that stubbornly dedicated child who sees themselves as making sacrifices for God, all the while with a perspective of banking on being recognized, banking on being rewarded somehow in the end?

God, I encourage you, all of us, including myself, to consider that as you recognize that you're the beloved child of a father who will always drop everything and run to you.

Because he celebrates you for who you are, not who you should be. And he always will forgive you for what you've done once you come back home.

Amen.