

# The Prodigal Son

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[ 0 : 00 ] Shall we pray, Father God, may your word encourage us and enthuse us and challenge us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

What would Jesus do? Encourage, shape us and lead us home. Hope. How do we keep hope alive when we're faced with this story today?

What does that actually look like in our lives? And on this day which is full for us all of mixed emotions, of fathers that loved us, guided us, encouraged us and parented us well, for the ones who made sacrifices for us, the ones who struggle or abdicated their responsibilities as a father, the ones who left too soon, the ones who became fathers to us and took us, who took on that role for us, maybe as stepfathers, carers, foster parents, grandfathers, the ones who have gone home to be with our Heavenly Father.

And as a father, I had hopes, I have hopes for my children. From the day they were born, it may be even before that.

We have hopes for our children that they will be grounded, faithful, prayerful, they have lives that are fruitful, honest and caring.

[ 1 : 31 ] And in this story this morning that resonates, what happened to this son who decided to leave? Who says, I'm off.

Not only is he leaving, the son asks for his share of the inheritance. And this isn't given until the father dies, within the context, by asking, the son is saying, actually, I wish you were dead.

You know, perhaps parents here know what that is like. The pain of a child saying that to you as they leave, either as they leave physically or emotionally.

A parting comment or words that cut you deep. There is nothing more painful than a child that turns to a parent and rejects their love.

Our story today is complex. It rips us apart for the father and the son and the older brother and the whole community. The question is, when we read this, is where did it start?

[ 2 : 47 ] We aren't told. And many of us here and listening, maybe on a podcast as well, would struggle perhaps to know the day when a domestic situation or an issue within the family or an issue within their child turned from a happy, loving child who was fun to be around.

The rich memories of growing up, of holding this child in your arms, and now the painful reality of how the child has turned into a painful, hurtful teenager who didn't want or seems to gel with the family anymore.

There is nothing in this story where I guess the father hoped that the clock just wouldn't spin back a few years. Some here will know the pain of that.

And our prayers are with you. There are crucial messages in this parable that shocked the listeners of Jesus' day. The Pharisees, the religious people who kept the law and believe me, did they keep the law.

In Jesus' time, you did not dishonor. Your father or your mother. It brought shame. This was a public shaming by a son openly in rebellion against the father and indeed his whole house and the older brother.

[ 4 : 18 ] For the father, others would judge him. This is shame on lack of authority and control that others would be placing on the father as well.

And rebellion was not to be tolerated. In fact, the father would publicly rip a piece of his own clothing off of his garment in the temple or before the people to show that he had actually cut off his son forever, that there was no way back.

Why didn't the father do this in the story? Because this isn't the father of the culture.

This is the father that shapes the culture. Really need to hear that this morning. This isn't the father of the culture. This is our heavenly father who shapes the culture.

Because this is where we should play the song Frozen. Let it go. Let it go. Because that's exactly what the father does.

[ 5 : 34 ] Perhaps the most shocking part for the listener of Jesus' day is that he gives his son the share and lets him go and bears the cost.

That's the thing, isn't it, in this story? The father bears the cost. It points again to the cross. It points to everything. The father bears the cost. And the point that we often miss is that the son takes it and he knows exactly what he's doing.

The son takes it free at last. Free to do what? Free to go and sin and rebel.

Does that speak maybe to us of a culture for today? Maybe as we look around us, maybe even again, look inside our own church national structure of a culture of rebellion against the father's teaching and the father's love and the father's kindness.

Free at last, really? Maybe he thought so at the beginning. And what of the older brother? What of the older brother? Scandalous!

[ 6 : 47 ] Me! Me! Me! Me! The older brother! You know? I remain. I, the one who has to stay, the one who is still working until his father dies to see anything of the wealth of prosperity.

You know? Imagine then the resentment that is born in the older brother, simmering simmering as he sees his younger brother seemingly rewarded for his rebellion as the father lets him go with no sign of cutting him off forever.

This is the story not of one lost boy but of two. One has left home the one that stayed at home. Both were lost to the father in different ways.

One in open rebellion, one in simmering resentment and anger. And the older son cuts deep with many Christians because the older son carries on, doesn't he?

Doing the things the same way. Faithful, fed, comfortable, waiting for his inheritance at the end because he has a right.

[ 8 : 06 ] I deserve it. It's mine. And others who don't conform don't deserve the same forgiveness and grace that I receive.

Does that resonate with some Christians that we have met? Who did the father love most at that time? You know, this is God we are talking about.

Jesus knew that the story would challenge the listeners to the core. Maybe it does today. And the one thing I ask of us as a church on this day that we never become like the older brother.

You know, Tim Keller in his book *The Prodigal God* speaks of the son who was lost at home. Tim Keller says, Elder brothers expect their goodness to pay off and if it doesn't there is confusion and rage.

If you think goodness and decency is the way to merit a good life with God you will be eaten up with anger since life never goes the way we wish. You will always feel that you are owed more than you are getting.

[ 9 : 25 ] you will always see someone doing better than you in some aspect of life and ask why this person and not me? After all that I've done this resentment is your own fault.

It is not caused by the prosperity of the other person but by your own efforts to control life through your own performance. but it will constantly cause you to lose your rooting and footing in various ways.

We also see that the elder brother has a strong sense of his own superiority. He points out how much better his own moral record is than the lover of prostitutes and in disdainful language he says this son of yours.

He won't even acknowledge his brother as a brother anymore. Elder brothers base their self-images on being hardworking or moral or members of an elite clan or extremely smart and savvy.

This inevitably leads to feeling superior to those who don't have those same qualities. In fact competitive comparison is the main way elder brothers achieve a sense of their own significance.

[ 10 : 45 ] Racism and classism are just different versions of this form of the self-salvation project. This dynamic becomes exceptionally intense when elder brothers pride themselves above all for their right to religion.

what would Jesus do? The parable spells it out. This gives us a picture of the love of God his patience his persistence his character his never-ending hope in reversing the bad choices that we

so often make.

He watches and he waits and he never gives up. And we know our prodigals and we know our prodigals won't come back smelling sweetly many of us didn't.

We know that. But what we knew is that we came back and we were welcomed by a loving God. They didn't come back with a deep sense of wanting maybe to sing old hymns that they'd learned as a teenager because tradition control and judgment may be one of the few things that drove them away.

What they want to meet is the gracious and forgiving love of the father and not the older brother. Many years ago many of us went to a conference it's probably one of the most significant conferences that I've ever been to and it was by Rob Parsons Care for the Family and it was called Bringing Home the Prodigals and it challenged my heart for the Prodigals and for the elder brothers in the church brothers and sisters who so often wait to pour condemnation on other people in Christ there is no condemnation as we welcome people home and Rob shared when the father's house is full of the father's love the Prodigals will come home.

[12:57] Our job is to fill our house with the father's love because I believe at this time there is an urgency for our Prodigals to come home and we need to be here and welcoming and ready.

In our reading this morning it challenges us in hope that having prayed and watched and waited to throw our arms around our returning Prodigals and more importantly to own the struggle that makes us recoil in judgment and disgust.

The father saw the son far off he's been watching. Who amongst us are the watch keepers on the walls looking out for those who are returning home and praying for them to come home and when we saw the son and when he saw the son dragging himself home with his rehearsed story in his mind and maybe that resonates with you as we come back to the father with this rehearsed story of I am so sorry I know what I have done and whatever he is there coming through returning home and when he sees the son ready to live as a servant to grovel in humility the father in this story didn't stop to ask the son all the questions he didn't ask the question and said what have you done he didn't say what what did you do with my hard-earned money he didn't say why did you spend my money on sex workers he didn't say why did you use it on drugs and gambling and squandering it on people you didn't know he didn't know he said he didn't say you have brought shame on me and it's punishment time no he runs to him in several different versions in different versions of the gospel the father runs to the son this is shocking the father in those times did not run but he did and before the son can say his rehearsed speech he puts a ring on his finger and restores him to the status straight away of the son no off of course no grovelling he restores him to the place that he needs to be in his dignity and authority and before he can say anything he puts a robe on him this is my son who was lost but now is found he is home let's celebrate is that what we expect of our father's love of our father god do we party hard when people come and return do we party maybe for many of us who have long and long prayed for our children to come back to the father we never stop loving them but do we party and do we celebrate on those days do we party when people join us in whatever mess they come sadly the older brother is the only one who doesn't go to the party Tim Keller reminds us again this is act two comes to an unthinkable conclusion Jesus the storyteller deliberately leaves the elder son in an alienated state the bad son enters the father's face but the good one will not the lover of prostitutes is saved but the man of moral rectitude is still lost we can almost hear the Pharisees gasp as this story ends it was the complete reversal of everything that they had been taught Jesus does not simply leave it at that it gets even more shocking why doesn't the elder brother go in he himself gives the reason because I have never disobeyed you the elder brother is not losing the father's love in spite of his goodness but because of it it is not his sins that create the barrier between him and his father it is the pride he has in his own moral record it is not his wrongdoing but his righteousness that is keeping him from sharing in the feast for his returning brother sadly maybe our prayer this morning is today oh lord let me never be like the elder brother doing this just because it makes me feel righteous in my own sight and of others the father watched the father prayed his son home

I like you have been forgiven much each and every one of us have we know that's why he has placed his hope in you and me to bring and welcome the prodigals home and as we look out we look out with hope and grace and I pray at this time with a sense of urgency where else would people find such amazing grace than in the arms of our heavenly father and of his church people will we continue to keep watch for our prodigals will we keep praying when they return seeking will

they be met with grace and overwhelming love I don't know what pushed or led them away but we're high enough on a hill to see them coming and to welcome them home God has given us space and resources we are free to welcome them it will change us it will challenge us and it is messy the father didn't smell too good

[ 19 : 42 ] I guess as he held his son tightly it won't be about us it will be more about hope love perseverance grace and character I'm going to leave the final word today with Rob Parsons with a story that he told on that day which probably changed my life forever in a village near here is a large old house an elderly lady lives there alone and every night as darkness falls she puts a light on in the attic her son left home 25 years ago rather like the prodigal in this parable but she has never given up hope that one day he will come home we all know the house and although the bulb must occasionally need replacing none of us have ever seen that house without a light on it's for her son

I pray that Christ will be that house that the light of Christ will welcome people on God's terms not on ours it will burn so bright in love that people would be drawn to him and to us Lord Lord what can I do what can we do to increase that love my son is home I'll tell you what let's throw a really solemn religious service for him no let's just throw a party and welcome them home no matter what's happened let's keep the lights on let's keep the father's house not for ourselves but for those that are coming this morning Tim can we thanks whether we came home some time ago or whether we haven't been home for years we know the father's love whether today it's you maybe listening to this podcast that suddenly you've realised for the first time the overwhelming gracious love of God if you are stumbling back not sure if you are good enough don't hesitate the arms of love are waiting for you and you don't even have to practice any excuses as to why you've been away I'm going to invite you to do what we did many many years ago down at mine head at that conference and I'm going to invite you to come if you wish and write the name of your prodigal who you've been praying for on a piece of paper and put it at the foot of the cross to the welcoming arms of the Lord maybe you don't even want to write a name on it but you just want to you know who that is and just want to come and put that there because you've been praying long and hard to be restored and renewed maybe the name that you're going to put on that sheet is for yourself because you know personally what that love of

God was when you came back and found his arms around you and you want that for everybody else because you know and we know what that meant for us to be restored and renewed and welcomed home in Jesus name please feel free as we say you you you you you you you you you you you