

The prodigal sons

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Date: 17 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Our reading today is from Luke's Gospel and we are reading the whole of chapter 15. Luke's Gospel, chapter 15. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.

Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.

Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?

[1 : 1 4] And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin. In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

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 got together 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.

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.

[2 : 3 5] 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 servants. 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 the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his fingers and sandals on his feet.

Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

[3 : 39] 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 have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. 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. 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.

[4 : 53] Okay, folks. The parable of the prodigal son. For many of us, this will be a very familiar parable, isn't it? And I don't just mean because we read the whole of chapter 15 through a couple of weeks ago.

It's familiar because it's one of those parts of the Bible that appears in children's books. It's a favourite at Sunday school. And for those of us with many years of sermon listening under our belts, this is perhaps more likely to have been one of the more memorable passages that we've heard preached as well.

You may well even have seen artworks inspired by it and so on. So maybe you're tempted to think, I know this one and tempted to switch off.

Well, folks, I'm not going to lie to you. I don't have some amazing, fresh, new insight. I don't have a radically different perspective. But what I do have, what I have is confidence that it is God's plan that we consider these verses together today.

And that suggests that he has something he wants to remind you of. It suggests that he has something perhaps that was there all along but that you haven't noticed before.

[6 : 01] So whether for you this is familiar territory or it's brand new ground, let's hear what God has to say to us today, shall we? So working through the story this morning, considering the different characters in turn, I have five headings for us to consider.

Rebellion, repentance, acceptance, anger, and pleading. And first we consider the rebellion of the younger son.

First verse of the parable provides this very simple introduction. Jesus continued, there was a man who had two sons. But immediately, immediately thereafter comes this shocking request.

The younger one said to his father, give me my share of the estate. And so he divided his property between them. This younger son, this younger son has no interest in being with his father.

He just wants his stuff. He requests his inheritance here and now and thereby says, dad, just hurry up and die already. I want your money.

[7 : 06] I wish you were dead. And having got it, he does what foolish, rebellious young men do. He heads off and squanders his wealth in wild living.

He's reckless, making no provision for the future. Later, verse 30, his brother's going to accuse him of squandering the money with prostitutes. We're not told specifically how he wastes his money, but that accusation is certainly very believable.

In any case, he's living a sinful lifestyle. And this wasteful, profitless, short-term-minded lifestyle, this is taken surely as a picture of the folly of rebellious humanity.

John Calvin wrote these words hundreds of years ago, but I like his phrasing. Calvin says that this foolish and insolent youth resembles those persons who, enjoying at the hand of God a great abundance of good things, are moved by a blind and mad ambition to be separated from him, that they may enjoy perfect freedom, as if it were not more desirable than all the kingdoms of the world to live under the fatherly care and government of God.

And we shake our heads, don't we? We shake our heads at the folly of this young man who thought that he could find happiness in the arms of a different woman each night.

[8 : 30] The folly of this man who thought that what he wanted were the kind of friends who are fun to party with, but who it turns out, verse 16, no longer have any interest when times get tough. We see this young man's rebellion, his rejection of his father, his rejection of God, and we tut in disapproval, don't we?

And probably we think of people in our own day who've walked away, who've rebelled against their upbringing in these kinds of dramatic ways, like this younger son. We tut, and yet, hold on a minute.

Bishop Ryle goes a step further than what we heard from Calvin. Ryle says, we have in these words, the opening verses of this parable, we have in these words, a faithful portrait of the mind with which we are all born.

This is our likeness. We're all naturally proud and self-will. We have no pleasure in fellowship with God. We depart from him. We go far off. We spend our time, our strength, our faculties, our affections on things that cannot profit.

This is what we are like. This is our natural inclination. Since the days of Adam, we've been inclined to make ourselves independent of our father.

[9 : 52] Instead of enjoying the good things given to us at his hand, we wander off. We cut ourselves off from his presence. We're lost, and it is our own fault.

Fortunately, the story is not done. We come next to the prodigal's repentance.

Having wasted all his money, which is his own fault, there then comes the famine, which of course is not really his fault. And he's driven to the extreme of hiring himself out to feed pigs, presumably at what was once a subsistence wage, but in times of famine doesn't even manage to be that.

And of course, to a Jewish audience that Jesus is speaking to, feeding unclean pigs for Gentile masters. This is as low as you can get, and he has nothing to eat.

And so, verse 17, he comes to his senses. And then I have two subheadings here as we consider repentance. First, there is the reason for repentance, and then the nature of repentance.

[10 : 59] The reason for repentance. Friends, let me ask you, what is it that brings this man to the point of repentance? What is it that gets him to that point of coming to his senses, of realizing that something needs to change?

What is the reason for his repentance? Well, first, he reaches rock bottom. He comes to the end of his wealth, that much is his fault, and the way the story is presented. The implication, I think, is that he had enough money that if he had the inclination, he could have set himself up in a sensible, sustainable fashion.

But he doesn't do that. He wastes all his money. And then there's the famine, this external force acting upon him, and he has no way out of this mess that he's in.

It's not like he can save up and eventually recover in some fashion. He doesn't even have enough to eat day by day. It's not like he has friends to call on. They've all deserted him. He's reached rock bottom.

And now, perhaps surprisingly, I say to you, see here in this point of extremity, see the evidence of God's grace.

[12 : 16] See, if he'd just reached a low ebb, not the very bottom, if he'd just fallen away, well, he likely would have stayed in that far off country, wouldn't he?

Too proud to return home. If it weren't for the famine adding to his poverty, wouldn't he have just wasted his life staying there feeding pigs or whatever? Miserable, but without the impetus to do anything about it.

A low ebb, I think, would not have been enough. But in this parable, that's not what happens. The famine does come. So is it over-reading to say that God sent the famine to bring the prodigal to his senses?

I don't think that is going too far. See, if we truly believe that God organises everything that happens according to his good purposes, well, here is a famine. Yes, a famine is absolutely evidence of God's fallen world.

And yet, yet in God's providence, it is also the means of bringing this man to repentance. It brings him to rock bottom. So here's a tentative application for you and me.

[13 : 32] Maybe in some situations, it's right that we pray for somebody that God would bring them low. That he would worsen their circumstances. That he'd bring them to the point of having no way out.

Of having no means of escape other than to throw themselves on his mercy. Because if we truly believe that the greatest need of sinful humanity is to be restored to relationship with God, well, doesn't that mean that it's worth any price to get somebody to the point of realising the need for repentance?

repentance. I say that tentatively, that we might pray for somebody to be brought low. With greater confidence, I say, let's pray that people, let's pray that we, for that matter, let's pray that people will have the wit to realise and to respond wisely when that point of being brought low comes.

Let's pray that the response will be repentance and faith, not self-pity and anger. And as we pray that that will be the case, let's also work to make that a likely response.

Because here's the second component in coming to that point of repentance. What is the reason for repentance? The second ingredient is repentance is feasible. Oh, there should have been another slide there.

[14 : 53] Never mind. See, see, at that point of of no way out, without, without the glimmer of hope, repentance seeming possible, without that, then rock bottom is the point of despair, isn't it?

But for this young man, he knew the character of his father. He knew the good things enjoyed even by the servants in his father's household.

One of the most important things that we as Christians have to say to the world around us is this. There is always hope.

You never need despair. There is always a way back. Repentance is always possible. And we'll see more of that when we consider the father's acceptance in a moment.

Friends, we have an obligation to make that clear to everyone. An obligation to offer hope in the darkest places most of all. To proclaim to those in danger of despair there is a way out.

[16 : 04] There is hope. But before we, pastor, consider the father's acceptance, before we move on from repentance, let's take a quick look at the nature of his repentance.

What does it look like? Verse 18, he said to himself, 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 servants. So he got up and went to his father. There are here two key elements about the nature of repentance.

first there is a recognition of wrongdoing and then secondly there is a change of direction. This man sees that what he did was wrong.

He plans here, he plans to say to his father, I have sinned. And even as he plans this conversation with his father, plans this conversation with the man to whom he basically said I wish you were dead, even as he plans the conversation with his father, he recognizes his sin was first and foremost against heaven, against God.

[17 : 17] Even more important than how he hurt his family, terribly though he had done that, even more important is how he has rebelled against God. This is always true, always true of any sin and the recognition of that is a crucial element of repentance.

He recognizes the sinfulness of his actions and then follows on the change of direction. He doesn't stay sat there in the pigsty. He gets up and goes to his father.

Repentance, so-called repentance, where nothing actually changes is not repentance at all. It is at best regret, remorse. True repentance always involves a change of behavior.

Not only saying I'm sorry I shouted at you but also a resolve to be more temperate in behavior going forward. Not only stopping your dishonest tax collecting but also returning what you stole.

Not only regretting your sexual immorality but stopping sleeping with the person who you're not married to or installing the blocking software on your computer. Stopping the behavior from the sins that seem to us the most minor through the scale to the most egregious.

[18 : 34] in every case repentance from sin involves a change of behavior. Turning away from sin and turning towards righteousness.

Well there's the youngest son. We've seen the folly of rebellion. We've seen the nature of repentance as well as what brings it about. So let's turn now to acceptance. Let's look at the father in this story.

Verse 20 whilst his son 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 round 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 the father said to his servants quick bring the best robe and put it on him put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet bring the fat and calf and kill it let's have a feast and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found and so they began to celebrate. Now friends it's perhaps too easy for us to gloss over but we really do need to notice how radical this attitude is here.

[19 : 52] Clearly this father has been anxiously waiting hoping for his son to return he sees him while he's still a long way off and throwing propriety to the wind he runs to embrace his son who's returned.

In a culture where the patriarch of the household would most certainly not be seen to run anywhere in that culture he hitches up his long flowing robe and he pegs it down the road nothing is more important to him than expressing his joy at his son's return and welcoming him home.

all of this despite how hurt he must have been despite the dishonour to the family of the son having left in such circumstances despite the length of time that he's been sat there waiting as soon as he sees his son he's off and like the shepherd and the woman in the previous two parables the start of the chapter like them the celebrations are lavish others are invited to join in this fattened calf this is being ready for a special occasion a celebration of some kind but what could be more special than this Jesus said there's rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents well this is what that looks like see how generously how generously the son is welcomed home not just a robe the best robe not just kill a goat no kill the fattened calf a ring on his finger sandals on his feet why this son of mine was dead and is alive again perhaps this this prodigal son perhaps he felt some uncertainty about whether or not he'd be accepted back that seems to be the tenor of verse 19 when he intended to say

I'm no longer worthy to be called your son make me like one of your hired servants but he doesn't actually get that far does he verse 21 he says to the father I've sinned against heaven and against you I'm no longer worthy to be called your son but he never gets as far as make me like one of your hired servants maybe that's because his father is so enthusiastic that he interrupts that prepared speech with the call for the best robe and so on that would show the extent of the father's acceptance wouldn't it maybe it's because for the son to then ask to be made like a servant would be to seem ungrateful to request to be made a servant when his father's already welcomed him as a son with an embrace and a kiss again it shows the extent of the acceptance there is no doubt that he is welcome home when I lived in Derby quite a few years ago now I was part of a team that went and did assemblies in all the different local primary schools and one time we thought we'd tell them this parable of the lost son and so we talked through the story with the children with pictures and we asked them the questions and so on and we explained what some of it means

I remember one of the schools where we did the assembly and then at the end of the assembly the head teacher stood up and he said to the children so remember children no matter what you've done you can always come home to your parents they will always welcome you back I came this close to interrupting him in the middle of the assembly to contradict what he was saying I didn't I hasten to add but what absolute twaddle what nonsense that isn't true is it it isn't true that parents will always welcome their children home I wish it were it might be legitimate to take this parable and to say to parents if you want to follow Jesus you have to accept adopt this forgiving attitude you have to always accept your children if you want to be like Jesus that might be a legitimate application but to say to a group of a couple of hundred children your parents will always welcome you back it isn't true not all parents are that forgiving not all parents are good parents

[23 : 51] I imagine some of those children listening to that teacher were in horrendous home situations I imagine some of those parents probably had an attitude more like three strikes and you're out towards rebellious teenagers than this kind of forgiveness what that head teacher said wasn't true and it certainly wasn't the point of this parable was it the point here is not about families the call here is to come to God in repentance no matter what you have done the point is that the forgiveness offered by the father here in this parable who represents God the point is that God's forgiveness goes far beyond what you might reasonably expect from a human father the point is that God will always welcome you back even if you've had a terrible experience with your human father this is what God is like now now so far this is a great story isn't it this is a happy tale foolish son comes home father embraces him they all live happily ever after but Jesus isn't done we must consider now the anger to remember the context in which

Jesus is telling this parable Jesus has been observed welcoming sinners and eating with them verse 1 and Jesus here is responding to the muttered accusations of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law Jesus is demonstrating with these parables that his attitude in welcoming sinners matches God's attitude in offering forgiveness to those who desperately need it God's attitude in celebrating when a sinner repents and now now verse 25 he holds up a mirror to these Pharisees themselves hearing what had happened verse 28 the older brother became angry and refused to go in and in his conversation with his father we find out why verse 29 he says 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 this older son believes he's been the model son he's scrupulously obeyed his father's commands he's done exactly as is required of him but look at the language he uses verse 29 he says

I've been slaving for you this language gives him away doesn't it he didn't really understand what being a son means and maybe that's why he didn't understand what being a father means either now folks it's tempting it's nice it's nice to see ourselves as the younger son in this parable and that's well and good we should read ourselves into that especially if we respond by following in his repentant footsteps but we do well to also see that in most of us there is something of the older brother as well there is something self-righteous there's something that feels entitled to recompense for our hard work and disgruntled when others seem to be rewarded without putting the effort in we think we're not treated as well as we deserve and like this son we complain that we weren't given a goat failing to see that everything I have is yours verse 31 and even more importantly failing to see that you are always with me says the father see the younger son at the start and the elder son here towards the end neither of them seems to value their relationship with the father both of them only seem interested in what they can get out of it and you and I are in danger of being like this older brother censorious towards those who haven't lived up to our standards whether or not those standards are well set just like the Pharisees we tend to set up rules and boundary lines that just so happen to suit the ways we ourselves behave it's telling isn't it that the elder son here he wants nothing to do with his younger brother to the extent that he won't even call him brother do you see it there in verse 30 he's not my brother no to the father he's your son sometimes sometimes

I emerge from my study during the day and I come into the room where the rest of the family are and I pick up one of the girls for a cuddle and cute as they are sometimes I discover let's say something of an aroma and on such occasions I sometimes ask Joanna are you aware that your daughter has a smelly nappy and I like to think that I say it in fun but at least on some level it's a disavowal of responsibility isn't it in that moment I don't want to be associated with her and have to change the nappy of course I rarely get away with it Jo will point out that she's your daughter too but that's the elder brother's attitude here isn't it and on a much more serious level and his father won't let him get away with it verse 32 his response this brother of yours was dead and is alive again the elder son's anger is inappropriate and unacceptable and we must watch for it in our own hearts but fifthly our final heading this morning pleading we've seen already the father's response to the younger son how will he now respond to the elder son in his anger we've seen how God responds to us when we in our folly run far away so the question now is how does he respond when we stand on self-righteousness when we want to reject others and claim our rights well first let's note he doesn't pander to the elder son as we've already seen he doesn't let him away with that language of dissociation and verse 32 is unequivocal not only does he say it's okay to celebrate no he says we had to celebrate this is what's fitting this is what's appropriate as an aside we might note that we shouldn't let somebody else's grumpiness someone's joyless attitude we shouldn't let that stop us doing what's right we shouldn't let someone's unreasonable objections prevent us enjoying what

God has given us but that's not the main focus here how does the father respond to his elder son verse 28 his father went out and pleaded with him when the elder brother was angry when he refused to go in the father's attitude wasn't to shrug and say oh well his loss it wasn't to say to the others celebrating to say don't fret he'll come round soon enough nor was it to go out and become angry himself he didn't go out and command the elder son's attendance at the banquet no he went out and pleaded with him just just as he had hoped for the return of his younger son from the far off country so now he hopes his elder son will join the celebration again he takes action to bring his son home and this parable ends with a question the younger son is safe at home accepted and celebrating restored to relationship but what of the elder brother is he going to persist in his refusal to participate will he keep viewing his relationship with his father in such mercenary terms will he remain outside the celebration will he remain lost or will he be found and we're not told here how he finally responds well there's reason for hope there's reason for hope because of the father's attitude because the father who welcomed the foolish prodigal is there pleading with the self-righteous hypocrite and so we end with that question mark for ourselves don't we asking where do you stand now where do you want to be what is your attitude to the prodigals who have come home what is your attitude to the father where do you want to be the door to the feast is open wide let's pray lord god thank you for showing us your character in this parable and thank you for showing us our own painful though it is to see our foolishness and our self-righteousness and pride painful though it is to see a mirror held up and ourselves reflected lord thank you that you are honest with us that you tell us what we are like and in the context of doing that that you don't leave us hopeless but rather show us yourself as the father who welcomes home the prodigals as the father who pleads with self-righteous sinners thank you lord amen