

The Prodigal Son

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[0 : 00] America boasts its share of great authors. Chief among them is Ernest Hemingway, author of the famous book For Whom the Bell Tolls.

But next to that in fame comes Hemingway's masterpiece, set in First World War Italy, entitled A Farewell to Arms.

Most books have one ending, but Hemingway wrote an astonishing 47 different endings to A Farewell to Arms. 47. Now of course, depending upon the ending, the whole book would be different.

And Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is all about the ending. It's a masterpiece of a story about a lost son. But the questions we're left to answer really resolve down into this one.

Of the two sons in the story, which of them is really lost? Of the two sons in the story, which of them is really lost? Now this parable of the prodigal son is the third of Jesus' parables in this chapter. He told these parables, as we saw last week, in response to how the religious leaders of Israel grumbled against him because he received and ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus welcomed the morally questionable and the religious outcast. This is not the kind of behavior expected of a righteous Jew who wouldn't go anywhere near such a person for fear of contamination.

[1 : 38] Well, Jesus proceeds to tell three parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The first two parables are fairly straightforward. The shepherd searches for his lost sheep, and when he finds it, he carries it home on his shoulders. The woman searches for her lost coin, and when she finds it, she rejoices with her friends. But the third is more complicated.

On the surface, it seems simple. By his own stupid decisions, a son gets himself into trouble, then comes to his senses, and returns home to his father. A surface-level reading focuses on the lostness of the prodigal son and the loving grace of the father in receiving him home, not as a son, not as a slave rather, but as a son. But a surface-level reading of this parable is not enough.

What you're hearing today is my third rewrite of this sermon, because each time I started, I felt uncomfortable not about what I was saying, but about what I was not saying. I didn't feel that I was being faithful to Jesus' challenge in this parable. For example, at the beginning of verse 3, Jesus says, What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he's lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the open country and go out into the open country and find that lost one? And then in verse 8, Jesus says, Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search diligently until she finds it? And Jesus here is speaking to the Pharisees and the scribes and saying to them, Suppose you had a hundred sheep, gentlemen, and you lost one of them.

You would go looking for that sheep, wouldn't you? If a Pharisee had a hundred sheep and lost one of them, they'd go looking for that lost sheep. Again, he's asking the question, seems to me in context, Suppose your wife has ten silver coins, but she loses one of them.

Wouldn't she go looking for that silver coin? Of course she would. If a Pharisee's wife has ten coins and loses one of them, a tenth of the family wealth, of course she'd go looking for that last coin.

[4 : 13] We come then to the third parable, and maybe now I can explain why I think a surface reading of this story is not quite enough. The youngest son plays the prodigal. He's a delinquent who, having disrespected his father and his inheritance, gets as far away from home as he can. He wastes all his money, engaging in extravagant and immoral activities. He hits trouble when a famine strikes and ends up feeding pigs. While trying to find something to eat, he comes to his senses and remembers how good he had it at home with his father. He regrets his stupidity and makes for home.

Remember, Jesus is speaking here to Pharisees and scribes, and he's asking them to place themselves in this story. Many of them would have been fathers of sons.

And Jesus is asking them, suppose you had a prodigal son, but he came to his senses and returned home. How would you treat him? Would they not, would many of them not have done the same thing as the father in this story? Would they not have longed for their son's return? And when he did return, would they not have restored him into their family, not as a slave, but as a son? Think of your own children. Would you not do that for them? Of course you would. Of course, for sure, we can talk about the love and the grace and the forgiveness of the father in this story, but I'd like to think it's a love, grace, and forgiveness many of us, Christian or not, would show in such a situation. We would be that shepherd looking for his lost sheep. We would be that woman looking for her lost coin. We would be that father embracing his lost son. Of course, we could dwell, if we want, upon the character of the father in this story as being a picture of God receiving those tax collectors and sinners back to himself, but it rather dilutes the overall meaning when we consider that most of us would do no different if we were in this father's situation.

What makes the parable of the prodigal son so stunning is its ending. Just like, depending upon what ending he uses, Hemingway's farewell to arms reads different. So, reading the parable of the prodigal son in light of the ending changes the whole emphasis of the story.

[6 : 56] What happens after the lost son being received back by the father is that his older brother comes in from the fields where he's been working and begins to make a fuss. It's the ending of the story in verses 25 through 31, which determines how we read the whole parable and how we interpret its main meaning. By what he says, the older brother reveals that he is entirely as lost as his younger brother ever was. It's just that his younger brother is now found, whereas his older brother stays lost.

So, again, we want to ask the question, which of these two brothers do you most readily identify with? The younger brother clearly represents the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus is eating. The father clearly represents God. The older brother, therefore, must clearly represent the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling against Jesus for showing such grace and mercy to the undeserving tax collectors and sinners. They are the religious elite of Israel who are disgruntled by the preference of God to show mercy, not anger, to be glorified not in the destruction of the wicked, but in their repentance. To let the ending determine the meaning of the story places the strongest challenge, not so much upon the prodigal son to return, prodigal sinners to return to God, but on religious people to connect with and engage in Jesus' mission to make disciples of all nations. By grumbling at Jesus, these Pharisees and scribes are acting just like the older brother at the end of the parable. And by so doing, they are revealing at least five things about themselves. There are six on the slide, Sophia, but I've pulled one out. They are ignorant, unforgiving, forgetful, ungodlike, and outside.

And we'll go through each one briefly. They are ignorant, first of all. Ignorant. Reading this parable leaves us with the impression that neither son really knew who his father really was. When he came to himself in that far-off land, the prodigal son thought that if he returned home, the only way he'd find a place at home was as a servant. He didn't know his father well enough to appreciate how warm a welcome he'd receive and how he'd be welcomed back not as a servant, but as a son. When he heard the sound of celebrations, the older son was angered by how quickly and eagerly his father had welcomed back his prodigal brother. He did not know his father well enough to appreciate how much he loved his younger son. Both sons, but especially the older one, were ignorant of the loving heart of their father. They both thought that they had to deserve to be loved. The younger son didn't deserve it, and he knew it. The older son thought he deserved it, and knew it also. The Pharisees and the scribes listening to this parable thought that because of their religious devotion and their moral obedience, they deserved to be loved by God. And at the same time, they looked down their noses at the tax collectors and sinners and thought that they did not deserve to be loved. Last week, we listened to a quote from a Jewish rabbi which pretty much summarizes the way in which these Pharisees and scribes thought. Here's the quote, There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from this world. For them, God's highest glory is demonstrated in God's righteous condemnation of tax collectors and sinners. They look into God's heart and they see there a frowning face of a righteous God intent on the judgment of the unrighteous.

[11 : 34] In the Old Testament, we hear a different voice. In Ezekiel 33 verse 11, we listen to God's heart as He says, As I live, declares the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked man turn from his way and live.

Again, we hear the very same voice in Micah chapter 7 and verse 18. Who is like unto you, O God, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgressions for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain His anger forever because He delights in mercy. He delights in mercy. The older son was ignorant of the vastness of the love of his father, and we can scarce measure the infinite love of God for sinners like us.

Do you know how much God loves you? And that judgment is God's strange work in which He takes no pleasure. God's highest glory is demonstrated not on the condemnation of sinners, but in their forgiveness and repentance.

Whatever false pictures of God we were sold in our youth, we must look into God's heart and see there the inviting face of a God who patiently calls us to experience His mercy and His forgiveness.

[13 : 10] He was ignorant. Second, the older brother was unforgiving, unforgiving. Well, you can see these Pharisees and scribes were harsh, unloving and unforgiving men.

There were experts in the thousands of rabbinic laws of their forefathers, proud and dismissive of anyone not as good as themselves. One thing is for sure, this Jesus, He may receive sinners and eat with them, but they will not.

The father in the story of the prodigal son, He may forgive his son and restore him to his family, but the older brother will never forgive his younger brother, and to him his younger brother will always be on the outside.

It wasn't the older brother who lost his inheritance when his younger brother left home. It wasn't the older brother who stood at the window of his house every day longing for his son to return.

But even though his father could forgive his younger brother, the older brother could not and would not forgive him. How unforgiving is this older brother?

[14 : 20] Not only does he fail to understand the depth of God's love, but he also lacks the father's capacity and willingness to love. If the father against whom the youngest son ultimately sinned can find it in his heart to forgive, then surely the older brother should also.

The older brother proves himself a lesser man than his father because of his unwillingness to forgive. Perhaps the older brother thinks to himself, I've always been such a good son.

I've never needed to be forgiven. Perhaps that's why the older brother is so unforgiving, because he says, I've always been such a good boy. I've never needed to be forgiven. Forgiveness doesn't register in his mind.

It's not a category he thinks about. The Pharisees and scribes were unforgiving men, perhaps because they thought that they'd never done anything wrong, anything God needed to forgive. This is one of the hardest aspects of the Christian life, the call to forgive one another. It's so hard. Because by nature, we want to assume the high-handed position of the older brother and hold those who have offended us in contempt, wishing judgment upon them, not mercy.

[15 : 45] Forgiving others is really only possible when we realize how much we have been forgiven by God. If only those Pharisees and scribes could have seen how sinfully ugly their hearts were before a spotlessly holy God, they'd be far less high-handed and far more ready to forgive.

Are we struggling today with an attitude of unforgiveness? Reflect on the willingness and capacity of the Father to forgive his wayward son in this story.

And reflect on how you were and continue to be that wayward son in constant need of the Father's forgiveness. And though forgiving others is never easy, it will at least be possible.

Third, the older brother was forgetful. Forgetful. There's something about this prodigal son which reminds us of the Israel of the Old Testament.

You know, the Israel of Moses and Isaiah. This becomes clear when we read in verse 13 of a far-off country to which the prodigal son traveled.

[17 : 02] The two great salvation events in the Old Testament relate to how God rescued the people of Israel from far-off countries and established them in the land of Canaan.

The first, of course, was their slavery in Egypt. The second was their captivity in Babylon. Now, we know from countless references in the Psalms and the Prophets, Peter read some of them to us, that the reason the peoples of Israel went into captivity in the far-off country of Babylon was because of their unfaithfulness to God and their sinfulness before God.

They had acted like the prodigal son, squandering all the wealth God had given them, His covenant, His law, His Word, His presence in the temple, and so on.

And so they ended up in Babylonian slavery. But there, they came to their senses and realizing that it was because of their unfaithfulness and sinfulness, they had ended up in Babylon.

There they repented of their sin. And it was then, under leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah, God restored them again to the land of Israel. So the history of Israel in the Old Testament is the story of the prodigal son.

[18 : 20] The older brother in this story represents the Pharisees and the scribes. And they are descendants of the very same religious leaders of Israel whose failure to lead their nation in faithfulness to God those hundreds of years before had led to the nation being taken into captivity.

Yet these same Pharisees and scribes celebrated God's mercy and forgiveness in bringing their ancestors back from Babylon. They celebrated the Feast of Purim, a festival Jews still celebrate today, which reminded them that God had saved their, saved His people from annihilation under Haman in Babylon.

You see, the Pharisees and scribes forgot that they owed their very existence as a nation to the mercy and forgiveness of God in bringing them back as prodigal Israel from far-off country Babylon. They forgot the history of God's love for them and so resented, were resentful when He, when God in His mercy and forgiveness rescues a sinful Israel in Jesus' day from its spiritual bondage to sin. You see, when we act like the Pharisees and the scribes, we too forget that the only reason any of us are Christians today is because God was first to show us His love and mercy.

[20 : 02] If we live in the constant awareness of how much we have been forgiven, we'll be quick to forgive others. If we live in the constant awareness of how much mercy we are shown by God, we'll be quick to show mercy to others.

And if we live in the constant awareness of how much God loves us, we'll be quick to love others. Forgetfulness. Fourthly, I made this word up, I hope you don't mind, and God-like.

And God-like. That's what these Pharisees and scribes are. Now, the culture into which Jesus spoke the parable of the prodigal son, very different from ours, very different. If you look at this parable through Middle Eastern eyes, it reads very differently from how we view it with Western eyes.

Chief among the differences is this. In the ancient Middle East, the older brother had far more responsibilities in the family than they do in our culture.

Chief among them is this. When the younger son left home and travelled to that far-off country, it was, in the culture of the day, the older brother's responsibility to drop everything and to follow his younger brother to that far-off country to find him and then bring him home.

[21 : 33] That was what was expected in the culture of the day. Think back to the story in Genesis of Joseph and his brothers. When Joseph was prince of Egypt, his brothers came to Egypt to buy food.

Through a series of events, Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, was found to have Joseph's silver cup in his sack. Benjamin faces a lifetime in an Egyptian jail.

That is, until his older brothers volunteer to take his place. You see, the older brothers recognised their responsibility to care for their younger brother and bring him home.

And in the same way, it was the older brother in this story's responsibility to rescue his younger brother from that far-off country. But he did not do what the culture of the day nor his family responsibilities demanded of him.

He stayed at home and he allowed his little brother to get into the mess that he did. And that's how these Pharisees and scribes are acting toward these tax collectors and sinners.

[22 : 45] As the older brothers of Israel, they should be seeking and saving the lost. They should be going to the outsider and bringing them home to the tax collector, to the sinner.

But they refuse to get their hands dirty. They refuse to do what culture and family demand. But what they did not do, God did by sending his son Jesus.

Jesus received these sinners. Jesus brought them in from the outside. Jesus, the older brother, he preached to them a message of love and repentance, inviting them to return to God from the darkness of their sins.

What the Pharisees should have done, God did in Christ. What is the cross of Jesus but God bringing us back from the darkness of our sin and the fear of death?

The cross is God's ultimate searchlight. The shepherd bearing us on his shoulders and bringing us home. The woman sweeping the house and finding her lost coin.

[23 : 54] The older brother going off into that far country to bring his younger brother back to his father. Let's praise God today that what human religion could not and did not do, God did for us in Christ Jesus.

He himself rescued and saved us by the cross and resurrection of his son. So, the older brother, ignorant, unforgiving, forgetful, unloving, not going into that today, ungodlike, and finally, outside. Outside. As we close, I want to focus on one of the most heartbreaking features of this story. So, we have the father and the youngest son and they're celebrating in the house.

There's music, there's sounds of rejoicing. But outside, there's a sulking older brother and he refuses to come in. His father goes out to him, which again, in the culture of the day, is an insult to the dignity of his father.

The father should not have to explain his actions to his son, rather the son should accept what his father was doing. But there he is, the older brother, there's a party going on on the inside, but he's on the outside.

[25 : 12] We do not know, because it is not said, whether he ever comes in. But as far as we are concerned, the attitude of the older brother is summed up in verse 28.

He was angry and refused to come in. Who did he hurt by his actions? For sure he hurt his younger brother and his father.

But more than anyone else, he hurt himself. For while the family were celebrating on the inside, he was sulking and desperately unhappy on the outside.

You know, as we go through Luke's gospel, those who refuse the gospel of Jesus Christ are always pictured as being on the outside.

The outside of a banquet. The outside of a marriage feast. When we look at the story of the rich man and Lazarus in two weeks. The outside of heaven. We might think it was the younger son who deserved to be on the outside, but his father was loving and forgiving.

[26 : 23] In the end, it was the older son, the religious one. He was the one lost out in darkness. The epitaph on the older brother's gravestone reads like this.

Outside, outside, outside. This man is on the outside of heaven. The repentant tax collectors and sinners will enjoy the beauties of the glories of heaven, but the self-righteous Pharisee will endure the pain of hell's torments.

The question for us is this. In the last analysis, which of the two brothers is lost? It's the older one. The older one.

Because he refuses to enter into the heart of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. The theater of the grace of God is showing, but the legalistic, unforgiving, unloving, ignorant, older brother will not receive a ticket and go in, even if it's free.

There may be some of us here today who just have not understood the heart of the gospel, that God's love is totally undeserved.

[27 : 38] His salvation is entirely of grace from beginning to end, that it's all about what He has done for us in the cross of Christ. shall there be any of us here today who though we may look like we're on the inside, will end up sulking on the outside?

Faith in Jesus, faith in the gracious heart of God of the cross of Jesus Christ, that's what makes all the difference. So shall we, like the prodigal son, come to our senses today, and rather than sulk on the outside, celebrate on the inside with our older brother, Jesus Christ, with God our Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.