

Back to the Father's House

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 September 2009

Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, friends, we come to one of the greatest stories that Jesus ever told.

And it's one of the most famous stories Jesus ever told. I'm going to argue today it's one of the most misunderstood, not least because of the title of the story, The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

It's a theme of many famous paintings, very moving works of art, themes of movies and books. It really has been quite an influential and profound story or parable that Jesus told.

But very interestingly, friends, Jesus himself starts this story by saying, a man had two sons. And so Jesus himself is not saying it's all about one son.

For Jesus, what we're going to hear from today is a story of two sons, not just one. And so that's already a little bit of a clue that we may be on the wrong track with our popular understanding of the parable of the prodigal son singular.

[1 : 03] Now, I've been greatly helped in my study of this passage by a book I read a month ago or so by Timothy Keller called The Prodigal God. It's a very short book. You could read it in about an hour.

The Prodigal God, Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith. Tim Keller is a Presbyterian church planter in New York. And this is just an amazing book.

I'm sure it's destined to be a real Christian classic. And I've even, there's a copy in our church library that you can borrow. And I've got other copies at the door today to give away to you, especially if you're visiting today.

And I'll give some quotes in that book a bit later. But let's get started because there's lots here. And I'm going to try and focus less on the bits you know well, that is the first half of the story, the prodigal, and give you more of the second half of the other brother.

But let's look very quickly at the first brother. The younger of the two sons said to his father, Father, give me a share of the property that will belong to me. So he divided his property between them.

[2 : 09] What is he asking for? What is this request? Well, he's saying to his father, I want to live with the money and the wealth that I will have when you are dead. I want to live as if you are dead.

Give me my inheritance now so I can leave you. It's a very hurtful. It's a very evil, contemptuous thing for a son to say to a father. In the Jewish world, there is great identity grounded in the land that the family owned, especially because they believed rightly at that time that it was God's land for them.

And so for the family, they would have had to sell some of that land. There's no bank money in the bank. There's no shares you could sell. You'd basically have to carve off a very large proportion of the family farm and then just give the money to the son and he just walks off.

So it's a very costly thing for the father to do. But he does acquiesce and he assents to the request and he lets the son go and the family is broken up.

This is a genuine burning of bridges. There's no doubt here of the contempt that the son is shown to his father. A few days later, the youngest son gathered all he had, all this new money, and travelled to a distant country.

[3 : 26] And you can guess what's going to happen. A young man, hungry for the pleasures of this world, there he squandered his property in dissolute living. A fool and his money are soon parted and so is a hedonistic young man and his money.

And he has, you know, he spends it on every earthly pleasure, every lust of man he explores and just indulges in. And you can guess with me, you know, what sort of things he would spend it on and how quickly your money would go.

So, drugs, women, partying. Later in the story, we find from the elder brother that he's been spending on prostitutes. It doesn't take long to run out of money. And there's no sense here that he really gets anything out of this. It's a dissolute living. It's wasted living. C.S. Lewis talks about the formula for this kind of wasted, dissolute living. In this way, he says, you will have an ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing pleasure. So, you know, it may be exciting the first time you go to the prostitute and then the next time you get less out of there and you just get ever, you're never satisfied.

[4 : 41] Ever-increasing cravings, ever-diminishing pleasures is the way of this world. And his cravings, as his cravings increase, his money runs out and then he finds himself in quite big trouble.

When he'd spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout the country and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country. So, he's an Israelite, a Jew in a Gentile nation and now he's becoming sort of like a slave in this Gentile household.

And they seem to mock him because they make him, they send him out to the fields to feed the pigs, who to an Israelite would be a most unclean animal, according to God's word. And so, it's a very humiliating job for him to have to do just to sort of earn enough money to survive. And yet, it seems he's starving. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating and no one gave him anything.

So, even the pigs are doing better than him. This has been a giant mistake. In his desperation, he has a plan. And now, he knows very clearly in his own mind there's really no way to go back to the father's house.

[5 : 58] He has burnt those bridges. He has cut himself off from the family and really, they should not even talk to him. But he thinks, remembering the good character of his father, he says, well, my father's, employees were treated pretty well.

They had more food than I'm getting. So, maybe I'll just go back home and plead mercy so I can at least become, well, so I can just become an employee and live out with the shearers and the shearers shed and at least I'll have something to eat.

So, he works up this speech. It's a very good speech, actually. It's a very good attitude. When he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare?

And here I am, dying of hunger. I will get up and go to my father. I will say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

Treat me like one of your hired hands. So, that's his speech. You can see how spiritually in touch he is.

[7 : 07] He says he came to himself. He doesn't say, you know, Father, I've just sinned bad. You know, I've done some bad things out here. No, he says, I've sinned against you.

I've shown contempt for you. The biggest sin he's sinned is not the immorality as such but the rejection of his father. And that's his speech.

I've sinned against heaven, against God and against you, my only father. And so, he has a speech planned and he sets off home. Verse 20. Now, this is the first surprise of the story which to us isn't a surprise because it's so well known.

We know what the father will do, don't we? He set off and went to his father but while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.

So, you get this sense that the father sees him before he sees the father. The father has been on watch, has been pacing the veranda every day hoping that this son might return.

[8 : 08] And he's filled with compassion, not anger but great love. And in an undignified way, the father runs out, goes to the son, puts his arm around him and kissed him.

And the son begins his speech. Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. And then the father interrupts.

It's like, that's all I needed to hear. You're here, you're repentant, you're sorry, you want to come home. Right. It's time to throw a party.

So, the father stops, the son is set enough and the father says to the slaves, quickly, bring out a robe, bring out the best robe, put it on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

Get the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. They began to celebrate. You know, I like to eat a spit roast.

[9 : 13] This is a great, going to be a huge party. They're going to kill the best fatted calf for the son. It's going to be an expensive party. They're going to use a lot of money on this great celebration of the son who was dead and is alive.

What does it mean, do you think, to put the best robe on the son? What does that say? Well, where would you get the best robe? He's ordering his slaves to go into his own wardrobe and get the father's best robe and the father's saying, put my robe on him, put my ring on him. He's back in the family. He's reinstated into this family. Inheritance and all. He will have a new inheritance.

We'll, whatever, you know, when I die, we'll have to divide it up again and he'll get a new percentage of whatever was left. He is back in the father's family. It's a great result for the son, a result of grace and of mercy.

The son that was lost is now found. He's back with new pleasures that he never imagined. It's so ironic that he went away seeking pleasure and didn't find it and now where he left was where he finds the deepest joy in this celebration, true pleasure in the arms of his father.

[10 : 34] Well, how is this relevant to us? How is this relevant to you? Well, it's relevant in a very obvious way because you don't need me to tell you.

You know, the father in the story represents God the father and that if you are a sinner, no matter what bad things you've done wrong, no matter what contempt you've shown for God or what immoral things you've indulged in, no matter how much of your life you've wasted, God the father welcomes you.

God the father says, come home, come back to my heavenly family. I want to forgive you. I want to give you eternal life. I want you to be in a relationship with me and live for me and enjoy me and join the party that will be heaven with the father at the centre.

This is God's offer of adoption which is open to all of us today. So, if that is you, then please pray the prayer that the son prayed.

Tell God, I've sinned against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your child. Tell God, please forgive me. Forgive me through Jesus Christ who shed his blood for me so that I could be forgiven.

[11 : 46] I want to have Jesus my saviour and Lord. I want to be back in the home. I want to have the inheritance of eternal life. If you pray that prayer today, you will have eternal life.

That's the gospel. If that is your prayer and I invite you to pray it as I speak or pray it with me at the end of this sermon, if you pray it, then welcome to the father's family.

If you're not baptised yet, be baptised. Join us in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Be part of God's household here. It's a great thing to be part of the family of God.

Now, let's keep going though because I have a bit of a problem with just stopping there. My problem is that that story and that experience for many of us, maybe most of us, is irrelevant because we don't feel like prodigals.

Whether we call ourselves Christians or not, we've tried to live good lives and we don't actually feel like, some of us maybe, but many of us don't feel like we've squandered all our kind of inheritance on dissolute living.

[13 : 02] It doesn't really fit very well for the eastern suburbs of Melbourne where they're kind of very moral, the eastern suburbs. People are very upright in Doncaster. It just doesn't seem to fit.

I mean, think about people you know who don't come to church. They will say to you, I believe in God but it's a private thing. I'm not interested in Jesus or having him as my saviour or church.

I live a good life and that's good enough, isn't it? And you're meant to say, I guess, you know, what do you say to those people? It's very hard to know what to say to someone who doesn't want to know Jesus Christ and yet seems to be an otherwise morally good person.

Well, I think the second half of the story will help us. Jesus said it's a parable of two sons so let's look at the other son. Verse 25, the eldest son was in the field and when elder sons, we've got to kind of build the character of this older brother.

Elder sons are always working. They're always doing good. He's out working, slaving away as we'll see. The eldest son was out in the field when he came and approached the house.

[14 : 23] He heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. Well, you wonder what the eldest son should do when he hears this news in verse 27.

The slave said, your brother has come. The slaves are happy and your father has killed the fatted calf because he's got him back safe and sound. Isn't that good? What should the elder brother do?

Well, I did a little test this weekend just to sort of test this on between my own children. So, I happened to be hosting a party for my five-year-old daughter and I just watched the involvement of the siblings and it was pretty obvious that siblings who love being in the family love the party of another sibling and so Lydia's brother and sisters were setting up for the party and they were the most enthusiastic in the games of the party and they helped clean up.

That is what the elder brother should be like. He should be glad that his lost brother is back. But he's not, is he? He's not. In fact, verse 28, the elder brother became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. The father loves him but I'm just not sure what we're getting back from the elder brother. And then the elder brother, verse 29, answered his father or rebuked his father.

[16:00] Listen, for all these years I've been working like a slave for you. I've never disobeyed your command yet you have never given me a young goat so that I might go celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours, doesn't say when this brother of mine, it says when this son of yours came back who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him? You know, the implication is you're an idiot. I don't want to have anything to do with you if you're going to do that. Very, very deeply angry, bitter, full of resentment, very quick to show off his proud record of achievements and throw it in the father's face.

He's angry and I don't know, I don't know whether it's jealousy but it's certainly a very self-righteous moralistic anger. Hear the love of the father towards such people.

The father said to him, Son, you are always with me. All that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice. We had to because this brother of yours was dead, has come to life.

[17:14] He was lost and has been found. How good is that to have a brother? How good is that? The father shows the same love to the outer brother that he showed to the younger brother.

Now friends, you need to weigh your own hearts here and think very carefully about who you're most sympathetic to in terms of the outer brother and the father because I think Jesus is saying the outer brother, he doesn't have a case to plead.

He ought to be thankful. I mean, Jesus tells the story very carefully. Of the two sons, at the end, we have a son in the house, a son out of the house, a son wearing the father's robe, a son not wearing the father's robe, a son who's hugging his father, a son who's turned his back to the father.

Which son is the true prodigal? Which son is the true prodigal? Which son turns out to be most against the father?

Is it not the elder brother? Is it not the righteous one? That is what Jesus is trying to tell us today. The elder brother is alienated from his father because of his righteousness, his pride in himself.

[18:42] Here is our message for today for good, upright, Doncaster people. And the message is this. Some of us do need to repent of our unrighteousness, but some of us also need to repent of our righteousness.

Some of us need to repent of unrighteousness, some of us need to repent of our righteousness. Let me share some quotes from the book Tim Keller.

He says, The hearts of the two brothers at one level were the same. Both sons resented their father's authority and they both sought different ways of getting out from under the father's authority.

Do you see? So the first son got out of the father's authority by sinful living, by lustful immorality. But the other son is trying to do the same thing with morality.

He's trying to resent the father and get out from under his authority through his own self righteousness. Again, Keller says, Neither son loved the father for himself, for the father himself.

[19:52] They were both using the father for their own self centred ends, rather than loving and enjoying him for his own sake. Let me ask you, do you love God for his own sake?

Do you want to enjoy him for his own sake or for what you will get out of it? Keller says, this means you can rebel against God and you can be alienated from God both by breaking rules or by keeping all of them very diligently.

and that's a very sober warning, isn't it, to eastern suburbs, upright Malburnians. That, I believe, is the majority way that people around us are pushing the father away through their own sense of goodness and uprightness and morality.

They're pushing the father away. And people say to me all the time when I talk to these people, they say, well, if there is a heaven, if anyone deserves a spot, it's me because I do this, this, this, this,

this.

But if you're pushing God away, heaven is where God dwells. If you're pushing God away by immorality, you're pushing yourself out of heaven and as far away from God as possible to the place Jesus called hell, which is the place where you can get as far away from the father as is possible.

[21 : 19] And hell is for a place for people who prefer to embrace their own morality and their own self-righteousness instead of God their father. So for some of us, our biggest hindrance to heaven will be our own goodness.

Again, Keller says, there are two ways to be your own saviour and lord. There are two ways to be your own saviour and lord. One is by breaking all the moral laws and going your own course and the other is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very good.

That just becomes another form of being your own saviour and lord and therefore you don't need Jesus. You don't need a saviour to die on the cross for you and you're rejecting God by doing that. Keller says the story condemns the destructive self-centredness of the younger brother.

It does condemn that kind of immorality. That is wrong. But it also condemns the elder brother's moralistic life in the strongest terms. And I think the saddest thing is that those who are like the elder brother are blind to it.

They are in a state of self-deceit. They don't realise what a bad state they are in, in pushing away God the Father. Because all the prodigals among us, they're easy really.

[22 : 43] people become Christians who are covered in tattoos and they've been convicted of violent armed robbery. They're easy to evangelise because they repent easily.

Their dirty laundry is on the surface. But for those who are moralistic and self-righteous, it's very hard to convince those people who are so convinced of their own goodness that they are rejecting and pushing away God the Father.

they're blind to their own rejection of God. Think about it this way. If you're not convinced, why does Jesus tell the story and why does he tell it like this?

It's because at the start of the chapter, some clergymen and some Pharisees were attacking Jesus for hanging around with sinners and thieves and prostitutes.

and they said to him, this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. And they actually kind of condemn Jesus for hanging around with the first type of son. And so what Jesus does, he actually tells three parables.

[23 : 53] The parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the sons. And what Jesus is doing is defending himself. He's saying, of course I will hang around prostitutes and sinners because they're coming into the kingdom of heaven in droves.

They're like the lost sheep that's found. They're like the lost coin that's found. They're like the prodigal son that is found. But then in the third story, he plants a bomb. So he's not just defending himself, but he plants a grenade that will blow up in the faces of the self-righteous moralizers.

And the bomb is the elder brother. It's all about the elder brother. And we get lost and found, lost and found, lost and found, elder brother, lost. Will he be found?

I don't know. The story ends there. I've got nothing left to preach. Jesus doesn't say. And he really puts it to you to say, will you repent?

You finish the story for me. Repent of your righteousness. righteousness. Let me, friends, close with some tests that you can apply, some ways of testing whether you are an elder brother.

[25 : 08] The first test is this. Elder brothers are very, very good at confessing sin. They will confess every sin and feel guilty for every sin, except they will never confess the sin they're really guilty of, and that is their self-righteousness.

So they will never pray, God, I'm so, I repent of my righteousness. I repent of being so moralistic. If you don't pray like that, then the chances are you maybe are banking on your own goodness instead of on the Father's mercy.

Another test is this. When things go wrong in your life, do you immediately think, what have I done wrong? What did I do last Tuesday that's caused me to crash my car on Wednesday?

If that's the sort of mathematics of morality going on in your head, then clearly you are doing something wrong. You are basing your worth on your own righteousness and you're treating God like he's a harsh lawgiver rather than a loving Father.

Another test is, are you easily angered and are you easily jealous of what other people have? Do you get angry and jealous and say, why did they get that?

[26 : 19] I deserve that. I'm at least as good as them. You know, why did they get that job in church or, you know, why did they get that home? I deserve that.

Why did he get that wife? I'm better than he is. If you find yourself talking like that in the kind of inner quiet of your own heart, then clearly you're banking on your own morality.

And friends, let me warn you, that will lead to a very small prison of dark anger that God wants to free you from, but you'll be very, very bitter if you find yourself doing that.

You cannot control your life through your own performance, your own moral performance. You cannot guarantee safety or health or wealth or blessing because of your independent morality.

You will never be happy just doing that. What God the Father wants today is to embrace both kinds of people, both kinds of sons. And really that's my encouragement to you today is to come to the Father and repent of your unrighteousness and repent of your self-righteousness, of your banking on your own goodness.

[27 : 34] God our Father embraces the immoral prodigal and the moralistic prodigal. Both are prodigals and God the Father extends a welcome to both, to the elder brothers.

He says, come, join the joy, join the party, join the celebration. Our God is our beautiful Father. He gave up his only Son, Jesus Christ, to shed his blood so that we could be adopted by blood back into the Father's house.

The welcome, it's a concrete offer on the table through the blood of his Son, both for immoral prodigals and moralistic prodigals. Friends, come to the Father today.

Come to the Father. I'm going to pray and I invite you to echo this prayer in your own heart in coming to the Father. Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you that you are a welcoming God and that you have spoken to us and invited us today back to your house.

Dear Father, we pray for those among us who have been banking on their own goodness, thinking that you owe them and yet in doing so they've been resentful and pushing you away.

[28 : 52] I pray, Father, that you would forgive us and help us to repent of our goodness and of our righteousness. And dear Father, whether we live really immoral lives or moral lives, I pray that in embracing your Son, we will have the joy that you have and that we will want to live for you, that we want to live good lives, not to bargain with you, but just because we love you and we're thankful for your great mercy and grace.

Amen.