

PARABLES: THE PRODIGAL SONS- Luke 15

Have you ever told a story in a public setting that was aimed at a particular person or group in attendance? That might seem rude, right?

Have you ever been there when it was done? AWKWARD, right?

Well, that is what we have here in Luke 15. Jesus is leaning in on the Pharisees and scribes. They are not happy with him, and he knows it, and they know he knows it. But for the next couple of chapters Jesus tells stories and parables that call them out, and they knew it. Maybe not every parable, but enough to where they were ready to have him taken out of the picture (Matt 21:45)

In Luke 15 Jesus is in the company of tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees and scribes. The latter two groups began grumbling or murmuring.

Jesus tells three parables that show how God loves a good party and celebration.

It follows two short parables about something being lost, then found with the owner saying, "rejoice with me." Jesus then compares that joy with the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

The intent of the parable is not lost on the Pharisees who were the primary audience for the parable. We've heard it for 2000 years and we're used to hearing the story and thinking that the crowd must have been overwhelmed by the love and grace of God. The narrative ends on a down note as the older son is left outside the party. The Pharisees get the message, and they are not pleased. They won't be going home to tell this parable to their hearers in the synagogues.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where the murmuring / grumbling of the religious elite will reach its crescendo with the cries of "Crucify Him."

11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him.

29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might

celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' "

If you are a younger or older brother you might really identify with this parable.

Thanks to Kenneth Bailey, as we look at this parable, we'll see it from the perspective of villagers in the Middle East and we'll contrast it with what would be a likely interpretation from a Muslim point of view. (Kenneth Bailey – The Cross and the Prodigal- HE examines the NT through middle Eastern eyes.

(Bailey p. 10) Muslim voices have echoed the cry "Christians have perverted the message of Jesus" and point to the famous parable of the prodigal son as evidence. Their case can be stated as follows:

In this parable the Father obviously represents God while the younger son represents humankind. The son leaves home, gets into trouble and finally decides to return to his Father. He seeks the forgiveness of God. On arrival the Father welcomes the son and thus demonstrates that he, the father, is merciful and compassionate. There is no cross and no incarnation, no "son of God" and no "savior," no "word that becomes flesh" and no "way of salvation," no death and no resurrection, no mediator and no mediation. The son needs NO help to return home. The result is obvious. Jesus is a good Muslim who in this parable affirms Muslim theology (i.e. we are to be good servants of God - allah)

The heart of the Christian faith is thus denied by the very prophet Christianity claims to follow. Islam with neither a cross nor a savior preserves the true message of the prophet Jesus.

Arab Christians in the Middle East have grappled with this interpretation for centuries.

HOW DO WE COUNTER THIS ARGUMENT? HANG ON AND WE'LL SEE.

Get the picture: v. 1-2

Jesus welcomed and even ATE with sinners, the outcast. For his opponents, that was simply too far. SO, HE TELLS THEM 3 PARABLES – The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost Sons.

The tag line of v. 6-7

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

(Kenneth Bailey)

Jesus' subtle humor is evident in this verse. The "righteous" who "need no repentance" do not exist. Naturally, heaven's joy over them will be minimal.

... The Pharisees should have remembered Isaiah's words, "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6), and the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes who wrote, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

PRODIGAL SONS - the YOUNGER SON v. 11 ff

Jesus opens by presenting the three main characters: The father and TWO SONS.

The younger son begins by expressing a 'death wish' in regard to his father. The division of property normally comes at the end of the father's life, not before. Yet, and surprisingly, the father divided his wealth between them.

Legal possession but not disposition was one option for division of wealth. The younger son took possession and the right to dispose of the wealth as he saw fit. And he squandered it all with 'loose living.'

Who does the YOUNGER SON REPRESENT?

-Rebellious humanity which wants his father i.e. God to die. This story line may play in the "Go find your authentic self" world view of our post-Christian, existentialist culture, but in the culture of Jesus and his audience, this story is shocking in many ways.

- ❖ -The younger son thinks only of himself and his desire to run his own life.
- ❖ -While the son has not broken any OT law per se in asking for his portion early, he has broken the traditional relationship of father and son. As a result, he has broken his father's heart.
- ❖ In thinking only of himself he hurts the rest of the family. In that culture the wealth of a family was held in common in the form of their land, houses, and animals. To lose one third would be a huge loss. "Not many days later" he had turned the assets into currency, i.e. an 'estate' sale at any price. He was foolish with his portion.
- ❖ He gave no thought to how this would impact his father. He was ungrateful. He goes to a far country i.e. "away from his own people."
- ❖ He expresses a foolish mistrust in his father. His "you're not the boss of me" attitude is rash simply foolish. Based on what we see from the father, he would seem to be a man that could be trusted.
- ❖ He asked for his 'wealth or property', not 'inheritance'. SO WHAT?

"INHERITANCE" involves acceptance of leadership in the family clan. It is a role of being a steward of the family estate and defending the honor of the family. It entails helping to increase the clan's wealth and representing the family at village functions. BUT HE WANTS THE property which he TURNED INTO MONEY. He wanted the privilege of wealth without the responsibility of stewardship of that wealth.

- ❖ -He cuts himself off from his family and village. The original audience would have heard this story with a sense of shock at the foolish behavior of this young man who thinks he knows better. He becomes a man with no home or roots. Such a man would not be trusted in that culture.

First century Jewish custom dictated that if a Jewish boy lost the family inheritance among the Gentiles and dared to return home, the community would break a large pot in front of him and cry out "so-in-so is cut off from his people." This ceremony was called the "the cutting off". After it was performed, the community would have nothing to do with the wayward person." (Bailey)

-The Younger Son is responsible for his own demise, and he finally owns it. The text doesn't describe how he squandered the money. The older brother makes a claim, but there is no verification in the text. He comes to his senses after hitting rock bottom feeding pigs, who were better off than he was - a repulsive job for a Jewish man. But he's desperate.

"It's what you learn after you know it all that counts" – John Wooden

What did he learn after he knew it all?

At least, what did he believe? He could create a Face-Saving Plan and go back as a hired hand.

v. 17-19 In coming to his senses, he realized the mess he'd made and the standing he'd thrown away – a Son. So, he designed another plan – A FACE SAVING PLAN - go be a HIRED servant, The son was counting on his father's mercy to take him as a PAID worker. He may be thinking that he can work to pay back what was lost.

It's not clear, but it seems that his focus was on the squandered money and not on the broken relationship with his father, family, and village. There is an element of him trying to fix it himself by being hired. It is an aspect of his attempt at saving face. He's NOT GOING HOME; he's going to servitude. (Bailey).

This is the default mode of the human heart – a works oriented transactional approach to God.

Even in his so-called "repentance", he is allergic to grace. He puts himself on a treadmill with the father. It may not be as obvious as the attitude of the older brother, but it is essentially the same thing.

THE FATHER

WHO DOES the father represent? God

He reacted in a way that would never have been expected. He grants the initial request even if it means that his son is turning away from him. In a sense, he accepts the “death wish” of his son. Regardless of that reality, the father remains the father. He doesn’t sever the relationship with the son. He holds out hope that the son might return and be restored. **While waiting, the father suffers, and it is his suffering that is the foundation for the restoration.** (Bailey p. 29)

v. 20 The father raced to his boy when he saw his son a long way off. He hugged him and kissed him BEFORE HEARING THE CONFESSION.

** God sends the provision by grace before we ever see our need.

We hear the story and get teary eyed at the image of the father embracing the son, but the original audience was probably shocked and perhaps even repelled.

The father breaks all protocols as the man of the family by running, not to mention running to greet a son who has dishonored him. In this way the father drops all pretense to preserving his reputation to run and greet his son. He is willing to lose face even while the son has a face-saving plan – ask to be a hired worker, which ironically is how the older brother saw his own situation.

At the feast, the father is seen a second time as He forgets his own reputation to seek the lost older brother. That is the God of the Bible and of the Gospel. Do you know the father in this way? If so, then repentance will become a way of life.

The Face-Saving Plan is short circuited by the kiss of the father.

The son never got to the negotiation stage with the father because he was overwhelmed by love and forgiveness. The pretense of the face-saving plan is forgotten or dissolved in the love of the father.

He sees the father’s love and the pain beneath it and he melts to accept the father’s will – restoration as a SON. He puts his destiny in the hands of his father. Like the lost sheep and the lost coin, the son is FOUND.

He experiences what Paul prays for in Eph 3 – that we might be ambushed by the length, height, width, and depth of the love of God.

ARE YOU? Do you give your heart time and space to consider the depth of His love?

This parable gives us an insight into repentance...

Repentance truly happens when we see the free forgiveness of God. It’s not going to God with an attitude of “Let’s Make A Deal.”

JESUS ALREADY MADE THE DEAL.

Repentance is turning from sin to Christ, or in this case, your Father who is there to welcome you back home. It is agreeing with God that we’ve sinned and agreeing with God that our sin is covered by Christ alone. It is NOT turning from sin to “That was so stupid. How could I do that? That’s not the real me” or “I’ll try harder to do better” or “Give me a second chance” or “What can I do to make up for it, Lord?”

It is the display of the father’s love and goodness that draws the son in, so he forgets his Face-Saving Plan. This lavish display is witnessed by the servants and word spreads through the village. The son is restored to his father and no one in the village can despise or reject him.

Is our Christian life is characterized by face-saving negotiation or by a grateful response to the amazing grace of God? Which do you bring into your relationships? Marriage, parent-child/ child-parent, church, work, etc?
Col 3 : 12-13

Our mindset is seen in Valley of Vision Consecration and Worship p. 232

O, if He would punish me for my sins, it would not wound my heart so deep to offend him;

But though I sin continually, he continually repeats His kindness to me.

We would feel better about ourselves if God would give some sort of punishment, though NOT TOO severe. Then we'd feel like we deserved to be forgiven, and we LIKE the idea that we deserve it.

How do we counter the argument of Islam? With this parable

They don't see or grasp how the father humbled himself to a place of shame for the sake of his son. That's not on their divine bingo card and they miss it in this parable and in the Gospel. They don't see how the incarnation and atonement are displayed in the suffering and love of the father, who endures agony all through the time of separation.

THERE IS GRACE AND HOPE FOR THE YOUNGER BROTHER TYPES

i.e. those who have probably been exposed to some form of religion or God talk and have said, "That's old news; it's not my thing. I'm going to find peace and meaning in my own way on my terms. I'm through with that intolerant churchy religion thing."

What happens once you've tried it your way or the world's way and found it empty?

To them, Jesus says, "No one is outside of my reach. No one can sin so much that my nail scared hands can't reach down and rescue you."

That was the shocking GOOD NEWS OF Jesus. But we'll see next week that such grace enraged some – the older brother.

The grace of the father enables and qualifies us outsiders to become beloved children, not hired hands. The outsider becomes the insider and the insiders become the outsiders by refusing to celebrate grace.

We can't say enough about the radical, even scandalous, paradigm busting actions of the father. He displays extravagant grace. He gives out grace the way the son gave out money. The difference is that the father's grace never runs out.

His grace will be on display for eternity- Eph 2:4-7

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

That's worth CELEBRATING!

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