

“Parable of the Two Lost Sons and the Prodigal God”

(Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today’s parable from Luke 15 is amazing and over many years now has remained my favorite parable in all the gospels and that’s saying a lot since all the parables are superb and priceless. Jesus taught these extended similes to illustrate what the kingdom of God and the very gospel itself is like in ways we can easily understand. Today I draw from a little book about this parable written by Timothy Keller entitled “The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith”.

First of all, the parable is known popularly as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but this is not a very good summary of the parable, because the parable is not just about one figure, but about three. There is not just one “lost son,” but two lost sons, and most importantly, there is a third figure, “the father.” The father represents God Himself and most assuredly is a spectacular picture of our Savior Himself: Jesus is the father and this is consistent with the rest of Scripture: to know Jesus is to also know the Heavenly Father!

But our popular way of referring to this parable likes the word “prodigal.” The word means “recklessly extravagant” and “having spent everything.” Again it is typically applied to the younger son, but there is nothing more extravagant in this parable than the love and mercy of the father. The father is the truly extravagant one, giving and spilling out a grace that is beyond all comprehension and that is greater than all expectations and normal customs. The prodigal love of the father is astounding; it is beyond measure. It is magnificent and overflowing and it costs him everything. He gives everything to his sons. That is how prodigal he is!

But first things first: we need to know more about the two sons, they are the lost ones and in truth they mirror humanity. The first lost son is the younger son, he is the libertine, he breaks away from all tradition and morality; he runs from the system. He is going to be his own free spirit. He represents all of the “younger brothers” in our society and culture who go forth to find themselves and to revel in their independence. They often will be the ones who will criticize institutions, the moralists, the religionists, and the snobs who they see as being full of hypocrisy. The younger brothers answer to no one and are proud of it. They are the rebels. They are the ones with no boundaries and no obligations. They are free ones who do their own thing.

The younger brother, the young lost one, is clearly depicted in this parable. He is a disgrace to his family. He dishonors his father. For him to make the request that he made of his father was to essentially express to his father that he wished his father was dead, because this was when the inheritance was to be given. “Hurry up and die dad, so that I can

get what I have coming!” In addition, the way in which he asks leaves room for the possibility that this younger son is also rejecting the custom of the older brother receiving first and to that, receiving more as the eldest, but the younger son did not care. All he cared about was himself! And then he goes to a far country which in itself is part of the disgrace against his family and people, entering into the land of those who have compromised the faith of his fathers, and to make matters worse squanders his inheritance in wild living. When he comes into need he is working under the most despicable conditions working with animals his people would consider unclean and so hungry that he was willing to eat the pods that pigs ate, an absolutely filthy and disgusting proposition knowing what the pods are often mixed with. The younger lost son had reached that proverbial bottom of the barrel. His plan remains self-serving -- for his whole life is not to honor anyone, but only to serve himself -- he knew that if his father would hire him as one of his hired servants he could begin to earn a decent wage and begin to repay his father. But through it all, even with his plan, he was still serving himself...life was all about what he could get. He didn't love the father for the father. He only loved what he could get.

Notice in verse 1 of Luke 15, the Word describes some of whom Jesus spoke to: the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus. These were the younger brothers. The rebels and open sinners.

But notice then in verse 2, Jesus is not only speaking to the people who could relate to the younger lost brother, but Jesus was also speaking to “the Pharisees and the scribes”. These correspond to the older lost son.

The older lost son is not an iota better than the younger lost son, but probably in a more dangerous situation. The older lost son was proud and he represented not those without morals, but those with morals. They were the moralists. They were not those who had rejected religion, but the ones who embraced religion. These were the moralists and religionists. They were not the ones who avoided church, but the ones who went to church. They were not the ones who constantly did “bad,” but the ones who constantly – in accord with their outward acts – were always doing “good.” These good, moral and religious people are represented in this parable by the older lost son. When he gets news of how the father welcomes the young rebel son, the older son has a fit. He is full of anger, bitterness, and resentment. He hates the father for what he has done. Remember how the younger lost son disrespected the father? Well the older lost son does the same! He does not speak to the father with respect, but just says, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat [meat was very expensive and rare in this time and place], that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours [he can't even call his own brother “brother”!] came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” (vv 29-30)

The older son was just as lost as the younger son: both of them were living not out of love for the father, but out of concern and love for themselves. Neither honored the father; both lived for their own benefit and gratification. The younger lost son lived for himself by ignoring morality; the older lost son lived for himself by trying to constantly keep it; the younger lost son lived for himself by rejecting religion; the older lost son lived for himself by trying to be religious; the younger lost son was libertine for his self-gratification; the older lost son was disciplined and self-controlled for his own prestige and power. Both of them demonstrated what truly makes sin, sin. It is not simply a matter of breaking laws, but it is more basically a matter of not loving God at all, but doing all for the love of self.

And this must have convicted the Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling at Jesus. These people did not care for the love of God, but cared only for themselves. Jesus repulsed them, because the very sinners that they strove to avoid, Jesus was embracing. Jesus was not honoring their self-honor; Jesus was not rewarding their great “goodness” and discipline. Jesus did not respect their great religious lives. Jesus also saw them as lost.

How do lost older brothers behave? Keller gives this wonderful illustration in his book: “If, like the older brother, you seek to control God through your obedience, then all your morality is just a way to use God to make him give you the things in life you really want. A classic example of this is the bargain that the young Salieri makes with God in Peter Schaffer’s play *Amadeus*.” (p 39)

I would offer up secretly the proudest prayer a boy could think of. “Lord, make me a great composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music – and be celebrated myself! Make me famous through the world, dear God! Make me immortal! After I die let people speak my name forever with love for what I wrote! In return I vow I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life. And I will help my fellow man all I can. Amen and amen!” (pp 39-40)

“He begins a life under this vow to God. He keeps his hands off women, works diligently at his music, teaches many musicians for free, and tirelessly helps the poor. His career goes well and he believes God is keeping his end of the bargain. Then Mozart appears with musical gifts far above Salieri’s. His genius had obviously been bestowed on him by God. Amadeus, Mozart’s middle name, means ‘beloved of God,’ and yet he is a vulgar, self-indulgent ‘younger brother.’ The talent God lavished so prodigally on Mozart precipitates a crisis of faith in the elder-brother heart of Salieri. His words are remarkably close to those of the older son in the parable:” (p 40)

It was incomprehensible...here I was denying all my natural lust in order to deserve God’s gift and there was Mozart indulging his in all directions – even though engaged to be married – and no rebuke at all! (p 41)

“Finally, Salieri says to God, ‘From now on we are enemies, You and I,’ and thereafter works to destroy Mozart.” (p 41)

But in Shaffer’s play, God is silent, but this is not the case in Luke 15 that reveals the true gospel and the true father.

This father is amazingly outspoken and pro-active for the sake of love and for the sake of mercy...towards both sons. And this is true of how He loves you, whether you are a younger son or an older son, it does not matter. His love for you is unconditional.

For the younger son, the father is willing to give up his life for his younger son from the beginning. Tearing apart his holdings and property while he is still living. He is already giving his life away to his younger son and then – in spite all of the dishonor the younger son brought to the father – the father would keep a look out for his younger son! “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (v 20) In this culture, a boy could run, a young man could run, even a woman could run, but for the dignified leaders of the land to lift up their robes of honor, probably exposing his legs, in order to run, this was an incomprehensible picture. The father did not care. It was not about his own honor. All he cared about was his son. He ran to his son before his son could run to him, and he wrapped his arms around his son and kissed him, with all compassion being poured out of his soul. And then the younger son tried to put forth his plan and proposal to become a hired servant, but the father would have nothing of it! “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (vv 22-24)

The father poured out everything he had for his lost younger son. He loved him with an everlasting love and super-abundant love. The younger son would not be a hired servant, but would be identified like the father, sharing in all his wealth, so that all that was the father’s would now also belong to the lost younger son.

But the father was the same with the older lost son. What an insult to remain outside this celebration of life and restoration for his lost younger brother. The older son was too proud, too resentful, too angry. He was rejecting his younger brother and he was dishonoring his father to remain outside, effectively saying to his father and to the world: “You’re wrong to do this and I publically take a stand against you!” But see what the father did! The father came out and entreated him. He came to his older son in the middle of the feast to say and to show how important he was to him. And he entreats his son! He essentially calls to him in humility and then reminds him of his total and utter commitment to him: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” (v 31) I repeat these words of the father: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours!” What words of affirmation, and of love and mercy! In-

spite of the dishonor and anger of the son and while the older son would not even call his father “father,” the father still calls the son “son” and then reminds him that all that belongs to him, he gives to this son. This is prodigal. This is extravagant. This is boundless grace.

And this is your Savior. He is your father. When you are as the younger son who rebels, he throws a feast for you and gives you His body and blood; and when you are the older son who is too proud, He is humble for you and comes in Divine Service to entreat you, to call you, to serve you and to make all that is his, yours. He gives you the kingdom.

What will we do with this parable? It is for us to get past reducing religion to what we do and do not do. And while these are important, they do not encapsulate our sin and neither do they encapsulate our faith. Our sin is rather seen in how we serve ourselves and avoid loving God. Our sin either serves our wild rebellion or our resentful pride or both. But the Lord does not permit these things to stop him from coming to you, from running to you, from going to you and entreating you, from – again – throwing His great feast for you. Here it is [point to the Holy Sacrament]. This He does for you out of the greatest compassion. He loves you that much. In response is true faith that is formed by this amazing gospel, this magnificent good news: this faith seeks to love God for God, for His mercy, for His compassion, for His love, for His grace; and to do what we do not for ourselves, but for Him and for our neighbor. In faith, we say no to the lust of the flesh because we love the Lord more than we love sin, because now we truly know how great the love of God is.

When we have that, we need nothing else! When we love God since He first loved us, then we have no need to judge and look down upon our neighbor, we have no need to contribute to the divisions in our world. Why? Because we realize just how much the Lord has forgiven us and if the Lord has forgiven us all things, then how can we hold anything against and over anyone else? We have been given new lives, new identifies, and a new love...and why? All on account of our Prodigal God, the Lord Jesus Christ whose blood has covered our sin and purchased for us new lives guaranteed through His glorious resurrection for us. We now live for Him while crucifying the younger brother in us and drowning the older brother in us and instead holding to our Savior Brother, our father, our Lord, and the One Who has set us free to enjoy God’s embrace, His feast, and His entreaty. “Thank you Jesus for loving us so! May we now live for you!”