

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

In our New Testament Scripture today, Luke 15, Jesus responds to the religious leaders and teachers who criticize his associating and eating with tax collectors and other 'sinners,' those the religious considered unclean. Jesus uses parables in his defense of his association with these pagan outsiders. The third one is the parable of the Prodigal Son, one of the best known of Jesus' parables, which has been called "The greatest short story in the world" (Barclay).

Follow as I read **Luke 15:1-3 and 11-32**:

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."³ So he told them this parable:

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound. ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had

to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), authored 40 books on the spiritual life, and several of them have been an encouragement to me, including *The Return of the Prodigal: a Story of Homecoming*.

In 1983, Nouwen was at a critical juncture. He had enjoyed an illustrious career as a popular author and lecturer at various schools, most recently at Harvard University, and was active also in campaigning for social justice. He was contemplating a possible radical transition of careers, from esteemed professor to a caregiver of mentally handicapped adults in one of the L'Arche communities, Daybreak, in Toronto Canada. While visiting a friend in L'Arche in France, a poster on her wall grabbed his attention, and was to profoundly affect his life. It was a reproduction of the 17th Century Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn's famous depiction of the return of the prodigal son.



Nouwen made a pilgrimage to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia, and spent several days studying this great work of art, jotting down his impressions. As he contemplated the painting, which shows the father gently embracing the prodigal, with the elder brother standing off to the side, Nouwen reflected on how this powerful depiction of the father's love actually became a portrait of his life. He noted about the painting that "all of the gospel was there." And in fact, he said, "all of my life was there" in that painting.

Nouwen perceived his life depicted in the three main characters in the painting—the prodigal son, the elder brother and the father. This experience prepared him for a critical transition in his life. But even more profoundly, this encounter with this painting gave him a better self-understanding and a renewed relationship with God.

The younger son, whom we refer to as the “prodigal,” at least 17 years of age, makes an unthinkable request of his father—to be given his inheritance (and being the younger son he would receive 1/3, perhaps less, of the inheritance) before his father’s death. He was in fact saying to his father, “I can’t wait until you die,” or even “I wish you were dead” (Bailey). Amazingly, the father, who would have been justified in refusing or even by the law in condemning his son (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), grants his request. The son immediately sells off the property (which normally is held until the father dies, providing living security for the father), liquidates the assets of his inheritance, and sets off for a distant country.

The younger son’s decision and actions were hurtful to the father and destructive to himself, his family and his community relationships. Going to a far-away Gentile country, he disowned his heritage. And engaging in wild living, in violation of God’s word and will that he had been taught throughout his life, he was bringing disgrace to his father, his family and community.

A skydiver without a parachute may enjoy his descent but eventually he will discover the consequences of the law of gravity. It’s not the fall from a height that hurts—it may even be thrilling. It’s the sudden stop on the ground that can kill you. The pleasures of sin are indeed enjoyable while they last but are for a short season (Hebrews 11:25). God has made us for himself, and true pleasure is to live in his will.

He had experienced moral and spiritual death, and was closing in on physical death. He was desperately needy, and realized there was nothing he could do to save himself. In that condition he came to his senses. Here we see that for this wayward sinner, grace was at work. A force beyond himself brought him to his senses. “He came to himself.” The son remembered the father and trusted in his goodness to restore him as a servant.

The son was now at his father’s mercy. This is what it is to experience grace—to humbly receive God’s mercy, forgiveness and love, and to feel the embrace of the Father. This is what Nouwen said spoke so powerfully to him about this story and Rembrandt’s painting. Nouwen desperately needed to let the heavenly Father love him. Although he had remained faithful in his ministry vows and active in Christian service, he had drifted from the awareness of God’s love. Nouwen was unable to live and to love rightly until he allowed himself to be held in the forgiving arms of the Father.

The older brother obviously represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the self-righteous critics of Jesus' acceptance of "sinners." In the painting, the older brother stands to the side and with jaundiced eye watches as the jubilant father embraces the younger son. We see his anger and deep resentment toward his father's forgiving love. The older son had been out in the field (25) while the others were celebrating in the house. He was now the one in "a distant country" (13). His resentment toward his brother and father, which have been building for months, perhaps years, now has come to a fever pitch.

Nouwen next identified himself with the elder brother, who had become "lost in resentment," which is a frequent condition of those of us who are in religious/church service. In this condition of heart it was impossible for the elder brother to join the celebration. Joy and resentment cannot co-exist.

It's possible to remain in the Father's house and be spiritually distant. I know what it's like to remain on duty in my church service and even in my ministry during those times when my heart's not in it. The joy is gone and there may be a spirit of resentment in my heart. I agree with Nouwen that being converted from being an elder brother is more difficult than returning from the distant land of the prodigal. Those of us who are lost in resentment are, just like the Pharisees, often unable to see our lost condition because we're too busy judging others.

When the father came out to urge the older brother to come join the festivities, he exploded in his father's face with an angry tirade. Refusing to address his father as *his* father, he shows that all along he had not thought of his father as a loving father but rather as a slave master. Disrespectfully he said, "*Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command*" (29).

We sometimes think of God as a tyrant who's interested only in ordering us around and demanding that we prove ourselves and our worth to him. This "god" we create, one who is never quite pleased with us, is formed in part by the marred image of "father" that many obtain in childhood, growing up under tyrannical, demanding fathers who are deficient in showing love and acceptance. But this is not the kind of father in the parable or in the kingdom. Our heavenly Father is more interested in our love, and is keener on assuring us of his love than he is in our duties to perform.

If those of us who are "elder brothers" or "sisters" in the church could be converted, what a difference this would make in our joy, fellowship and service! It would resolve and melt away our resentment toward God for not "appreciating" and rewarding our hard work, and would remove our resentment toward others who don't work as hard as we do, and who seem to only enjoy and celebrate being a child of God instead of slavishly following all the church rules.

The elder brother is self-righteous, that is, righteous outwardly and in his own eyes, but sinful in heart. He would've loved to have "sown his wild oats" too, but lacked the sense of adventure of his younger brother. He wanted to party with his friends, if only he could have done so secretly. Self-righteousness is what fabricate, an outward righteousness that makes us slavishly conform to certain rules, and judges and condemns others for not living by *our* standards, which we don't keep, if the truth were known.

But the Father yearns for us to enjoy his love and practice his mercy and forgiveness toward *other* undeserving people! The central character, the hero in the parable is not the prodigal, but rather the loving father. Nouwen identifies himself with both the prodigal and the older son, but gained a new look at the father. Jesus' parable not only portrays the heart of the Father, but also beckons us to become like him.

The parable is a portrait of the merciful Father who gave himself, his Son, that we might receive grace and eternal life. Like the Father, Jesus too was despised and rejected, yet has never stopped loving us (Isaiah 53:3). To be like the Father is to love and long for the return of our enemies, those we have wished were dead. When the father saw his returning son in the distance he laid aside all dignity and ran to meet him, just as the Father laid aside his dignity to come to us in his Son's cradle and cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

When the prodigal returns, his father doesn't let him finish his prepared speech. Instead, the father restores him to full sonship, giving the symbols of being an honored son—his father's best robe, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and a feast for the entire community to witness the son's reinstatement. The heavenly Father, like the father in the parable, is looking for sons and daughters to love, and not slaves to boss around.

The older brother was alienated from his brother and father, and needed to be restored to both. The heart of the Father is to reconcile to himself and to our enemies, beginning with those in his house.

Several years ago I received word that my worst enemy had died. I'll have to admit that when I heard the news, I thought, "Well finally. He has had to face God and give an account to him." But I was not thinking like the Father. The Father would yearn for this man to come to repentance and to come home to his love, mercy and grace. And I although I prayed for him and did so for years, I'm not so sure I yearned for him to be restored and reconciled to the Father or to me. I just wanted him out of the way! The Father wanted him to come home. I need to be like the Father!