

The Parable of the Prodigal Father

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. It's good to be here with you in Brinsfield again. He's one of the best-known characters in the Bible, even by people who've never opened its pages.

And all this despite the fact that we never actually learn his name. All you need to say are three words, and I think many people will know just who you're talking about.

The prodigal son. Yeah, I know that story that Jesus told about the guy who left home with his share of the family fortune, blew it on wine, women, and song, ended up in a pigsty, went back home, and his dad welcomed him with open arms.

Kind of synopsis of the story, and I'm not going to stop just here. Not so many people know that he had an older brother, which must have been really annoying for the older brother.

It's bad enough having a famous brother, but an infamous brother, and giving his name to the story. But actually, there were two brothers in the parable story that Jesus told.

[1 : 1 4] One who strayed, and one who stayed. But actually, the main character in the story is not either of the brothers.

The main character in the story is the father. Which is why I've renamed it as the parable of the prodigal father. Now, it's not a misprint.

Why prodigal father? Well, you'll just have to stay awake for another kind of... I'm aiming at 20 minutes here, just to reassure you. And Graham, you'll have to wait a few moments to find out why.

But first of all, what we need to do is read the original story in its context. It's found in the third of the four stories of Jesus that are recorded in the New Testament part of the Bible, written by a doctor named Luke, and it's in Luke chapter 15.

If you've got one of those Bibles down there, it's page 1048. 1048. And to get the context, we need to read the whole chapter.

[2 : 1 6] All right? We'll get the idea of where it fits in the story. So, page 1048. I'm in a church now. Thank you for praying for Hope City, where we tell people the page numbers, and then we say, and the chapter is the big letters, words, and the little numbers are the verses, especially for those who never wrote in the Bible.

So, Luke chapter 15. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and teacher of the Lord muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Then Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep, loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me. I found my lost sheep. I tell you in the same way, there'll be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who do not need to repent.

Or suppose a woman has 10 silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house, search carefully until she finds it. And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me.

[3 : 37] I found my lost coin. In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Now our story.

Jesus continued. There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he'd spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him out to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? Here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

[4 : 44] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said, Father, I have sinned against heaven, against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the eldest son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied. Your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back, safe and sound. The elder brother became angry, refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

[5 : 52] But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you killed the fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, You are always with me.

Everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

In the opening sentence of the story, Jesus introduces us to its three main characters.

He says, There was a man who had two sons. So let's begin, as the story does, with the first son, who we could call the rebellious son. This is the third, as we read, of three parables that Jesus told on the same theme.

[6 : 54] The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. While maybe the sheep is lost because of foolishness, the coin maybe because of carelessness, the son is definitely lost because he chooses to get lost.

He is lost because of deliberate decision on his part. The younger son said to his father, Give me my share of the estate.

Now you need to know a little bit of background. In the law of Moses, which governed the people of Israel, there were strict guidelines laid down for rights of inheritance.

The oldest son in the family got the lion's share, what was called in Hebrew the double portion. All the other sons shared out the other third. Everyone still with me?

Two sons? Oldest one gets two thirds? There's only one other son, the younger son, and so he's due a third of the estate, but not until his father dies.

[7 : 59] So demanding his share now, he is actually saying to his father, I wish you were dead. Let alone the difficulty and disruption of selling off enough of the estate to pay him out.

Yet despite this disgraceful and distressing request, there is no argument on the part of the father. He simply concurs, so he divided his property between them.

Why did the youngest son do such a thing? Freedom! He wanted to be liberated from the shackles of home life and parental restraint. He wanted to see life and all that he had to offer in glorious technicolor instead of monotonous monochrome.

And so fortune in hand, leaving not a single possession behind, he set off down the road to this distant country, this far country, with never a glance back. Such is life, sometimes literally, always spiritually.

Within each one of us, there is a desire to break free, a rebellious spirit which drives us to go our own way rather than God's way. Proverbs, the Hebrew book of wisdom in the Old Testament part of our Bibles, comments, there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

[9 : 19] Not that this young man believed it at this point. He was sure that the signpost to the far country read life and for a time it seemed that he was right. Life in the fast lane, fast living, fast women, fast camels.

But not forever. His resources, even those of the son of a wealthy man, are not limitless, especially when they're spent with such reckless abandon.

The word translated in verse 13, squandered, is the word used of winnowing when you throw a load of grain into the air and it falls back to the ground and the chaff is blown away.

That was what this young man did when he squandered his wealth and there were plenty of people around to catch the falling shekels. But soon, sooner than it expected, his plastic card is spewed back out of the cash point and a flashing light indicates insufficient funds.

And then, so unfortunately then, for this young man, a famine strikes the country. And not just a famine, but a severe famine. And the young man began, we read, to be in need.

[10 : 36] And so is everyone else. Belts are tightened as well as purse strings. And the boards in the job center are empty except for one which reads, swine herd required, food and lodging provided.

The lodging is the pigsty, the food is pig pods. But desperation and starvation and no respecter of persons, all his newfound friends who swarmed around him like bees around a honeypot and nowhere to be found now the jar is empty.

There he sits, his hopes, like his clothes, in tatters. At rock bottom. What abject humiliation for a rich Jewish boy to end up keeping company with unclean pigs.

Now, you may be setting out on the well-traveled road to the far country. You've grown up in a Christian home. You can't wait to be gone. Maybe you're a student. You've come to Edinburgh your first year and you've grown up in a Christian family so you're here today or for a week or two before you're gone and when your parents ring up and say, have you gone to church?

Yes, I was at Brentfield Evangelical Church. And maybe this is one of the last times we might see you here. You can't wait to be freed from the restrictions of home and parents. You don't believe a word I'm saying when I say it will end in ruin.

[11 : 52] Or maybe you are a person today who's already arrived in the far country and you're having a wonderful time. Life is truly fantastic. Freedom from all those restraints and regulations is so liberating you don't believe a word I'm saying.

But perhaps, perhaps there is someone here who's having second thoughts. Burning the candle at both ends means that it gets very short in the middle. Things that were once very fulfilling now need twice the effort and investment to get half the satisfaction.

And maybe who knows and I only know a handful of you here maybe some of you here are really in the pigsty this morning. It may not be outwardly apparent.

You're not reduced to sleeping on the streets though you may be. You may even have all the material possessions of life but you are still empty and still hungry and nobody has anything to offer which will satisfy the aching longing within your spirit.

But it is this point at the lowest point that hope begins as we see in the story. At last in the pigsty the young man begins to think and he can think now for his mind is no longer befuddled by the intoxicating pleasures and bright lights of the city.

[13 : 12] All he has to look at are pigs. Look what it says in verse 18. When he came to his senses he said how many of my father's hired men have food enough to spare? Here I am starving to death.

I've got a strategy. I will go back and say to my father Father I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son but make me one of your hired men. The Bible has a word to describe what happened to this young man.

It's a Bible word and it's the word repentance. Repentance literally means in the original language it means a change of mind which then leads to a change of direction.

The young man begins to think about himself and what he has done about his father and what he has left. Repentance is a change of mind which leads to a change of direction before note he did not stay there.

The key phrase is in verse 20 so he got up and went to his father. Now we'll return to the details later when we consider the father and his love but simply and wonderfully note here that the wayward and rebellious son is fully reconciled to his father not as a hired servant but as he goes down the road his father sees him and runs to welcome him and lays on a tremendous celebration.

[14 : 30] Bring the fattened calf let's kill it have a feast and celebrate. This son of man was dead and is alive again he was lost and found so they began to celebrate. How ironical that the son who left home because he wanted to have a good time ends up coming home and having a great party.

But the story does not end there for there is another son an older son not just the rebellious son but what we could call the resentful son.

When the younger son returned it's a beautifully told story isn't it you can imagine the story you can hear the drums banging and sound of drumming feet and he comes in from the fields where he's been slaving away working away in the fields and he's probably hungry and tired and as he approaches he hears the noise and he thinks what's going on?

Maybe it's a surprise party for me. So he calls one of the servant boys over and he says what's going on? Your brother has come he replied and your father has killed a fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

But rather than being pleased that his brother is back home the elder brother is incensed he is angry no doubt he is angry with his brother for all the trouble and heartache he's caused in the family the cheek he has in coming back home when he's blown his fortune but behind this will you notice there is a much deeper anger and his deeper anger and resentment is not against his brother but against his father.

[16:02] this is seen in his response to his father who comes out from the feast when he hears the older brother is there his older son and pleads with him to come and join the celebration.

Listen carefully to what he says it's very important but he answered his father look he says all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends but when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home you kill the fattened calf for him notice the contrast between his words to his father and that of his younger brother the returning son says father I have sinned the resentful brother bluntly says look all these years I've been slaving for you he doesn't use the word father why?

because he doesn't see himself as a son he sees himself as a slave you see the younger son had chafed against the restraints of his father and his home he'd shown it in open rebellion he had taken his share of the family wealth cleared off he didn't want to be a son anymore but will you notice the elder son stayed at home living as a son but with a slave mentality but now with the welcome given to his brother his pent-up resentment explodes in open anger for his father breaks all the rules by throwing a big feast for his younger son who deserves nothing while he's not even being given a goat to have a get-together with his friends it's not fair if there had been a national farmers union he would have taken his employer to the cleaners for compensation but you see he's not his employer he's his father he's not a slave but a son as his father gently reminds him and that the one he calls this son of yours is actually also this brother of yours my son the father said you were always with me everything I have is yours but we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again he was lost and is found now while there are many people in the world maybe a few even here today who are like the younger brother openly rebellious against God and his laws there are many outwardly good living religious people who are like the elder brother in fact this is the context why I read the whole chapter it begins with Jesus who is associating with younger brother types now the tax collectors and sinners despised tax collectors collaborators with the Romans people they call sinners who never followed God or his law were all gathering around to hear him but the Pharisees the religious people the teacher of the law muttered this man welcomes sinners and eats with them you see the Pharisees and teacher of the law were the religious people of the day the good living people who did their absolute best to keep

God's laws they would never be seen dead in the far country they would never associate with anyone who had been there they label such people sinners and they called themselves righteous you see their religion was based on the premise of punishment and reward God punished those who did what was wrong and rewarded those who did what was right it was a slave mentality and God owed them what they had earned so if this Jesus really was God's chosen Messiah if he really came from God he would have nothing to do with prostitutes collaborators like tax collectors instead he would only mix with folk like them but Jesus actually did exactly the opposite why he even went to parties they organized on his behalf with singing and dancing and lots of fun what kind of religion was it where such people were welcome where such parties were held no wonder they muttered the original language in Greek is one of those words that sounds like it has gone good and in answer

Jesus tells them these three parables with the same theme culminating in the last in detail which answers their muttering Jesus says when the lost are found there is rejoicing in heaven but here among the religious people there is complaining on earth as far as they are concerned like the elder brother they refuse to join the celebrations the chapter begins with them refusing to join the parties Jesus is at it ends with the elder brother refusing to join the celebration on the return of his brother so what is the root of their problem it is simply this the one fact they fail to understand or accept the true character of God who is the prodigal father now the word prodigal in the dictionary has two meanings its normal meaning is wasteful or recklessly extravagant it is used negatively of something valuable which is wasted but it has a secondary and positive meaning giving or yielding profusely lavishly abundant and this wonderful parable teaches us an incredible truth that

[21 : 27] God's love is prodigal it is extravagant his extravagant prodigal love is shown to both sons it is shown to the rebellious son first of all by letting him leave if he'd been my son and have locked him in his bedroom and double locked it or thrown him out for good but it is also especially shown by the fact that he welcomes home rebels and runaways while the younger son is still a long way off what is the father doing he's looking down the road looking for the returning prodigal and when he sees him in the distance he lays aside all dignity it's hard to understand this in our culture but people don't run and old people especially don't run he gathers up his cloak and he runs down the road running to welcome his lost son you see we come if you've ever been in the far country we come back expecting so little we're expecting at best to be a hired servant but we are welcomed home with amazing grace as sons and daughters given the best robe of distinction the signet ring of authority the sandals of a son rather than the bare feet of a slave and when it happens heaven throws a party graham asked me to speak at this he said we're hoping it's going to be a baptism well it isn't a baptism today but baptismal services are the happiest occasions in any church because we're celebrating lost people being found there's more rejoicing of in 99 people who think they're good enough and don't need to repent than one person who turns i wonder is that you this morning have you ever experienced the father's prodigal love no matter what you've done maybe even thinking about some of the things you've done makes you embarrassed and ashamed you wouldn't want anyone else to know about them i simply say to you whatever they are god is looking for you to return and he welcomes you with open arms and flings his arms around you yet you see the father not only shows his love to the rebellious son but also to the elder son you see the elder son has also defied convention seriously he shamed his father by refusing to join the celebration he should have gone into the celebration and then talked afterwards with his father and sorted it out he has embarrassed culture and convention and as with the younger son the father goes out to meet him he earnestly pleads with him also to come and he says look we had to celebrate and be glad you see the father's extravagant love his prodigal love is shown to the rebellious son as well as the resentful son he shows his love to the unrighteous as well as the self righteous and

I guess all of us fall into one of those two categories the great tragedy of this story then and now is that the self righteous stand outside refusing to join the celebration but returning prodigals join the party celebrating with the angels in heaven so this is a parable about the father and his two sons but of course there is a third son in the bigger story the one who is telling the story Jesus himself we're not told the parable is left open-ended did the eldest son ever join the party well the story doesn't tell us but the story of the gospel does tell us the eldest son the Pharisees the teacher the law religious people never joined the party instead they killed the one who tells the story but this was part of God's wonderful plan listen to some words written by John a follower of Jesus he says this is how God showed his love among us he sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him this is love not that we love God but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice to pay for our sins and I simply conclude slightly over my twenty minutes five minutes over but I conclude by asking this morning have you experienced the prodigal love of the father you know what it is to know God as your heavenly father are you rejoicing in that love today celebrating the prodigal love of God the father by which he calls you his son and daughter another verse from the Bible written again by John see what great love the father has lavished on us that we we unrighteous self-righteous should be called the children of

God so I simply conclude by asking you three questions are you lost or found are you a slave or a son are you grumbling or rejoicing let's pray together our father in heaven thank you so much for your amazing prodigal love generous love shown to each one of us here not one of us deserves your love one of us deserves to be a member of your family to be called your child your son and daughter and yet you've made it possible by giving your own son up for us so whoever we are this morning as we bow in your presence you know who we are and where we are whether we're in the far country whether we're on the road home whether we're standing outside angry refusing to join the party show your love to us by your spirit and may we rejoice today with the angels in heaven that you welcome us back as lost people we pray in

Jesus name Amen