

The Prodigal Sons

Charles Dickens said the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15:11-32 was the greatest short story ever written. William Shakespeare borrowed plots and motifs from the parable for *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry IV*. He also alluded to this story in other dramas as well. The world's great art museums bring to life scenes from this parable of Jesus' as illustrated in famous drawings and paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Dürer and others.

The parable is about two sons and a loving father. The youngest demanded his inheritance early: "...Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me..." (Luke 15:12b). The inheritance of the father was only to be given after the death of the father. This is a very sad request because, in essence, the younger son was saying, "Father, I wish you were dead. I don't want you; I want your money." The father gave the youngest son the portion that would have been given at death. The prodigal then went into a far country and "...there wasted his substance with riotous living" (Luke 15:13c). He soon found out that the world did not love him and they were not his friends. They were more than willing to let him lie with the pigs and eat their slop. Thank God, one day "...he came to himself..." (Luke 15:17a) and said, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee" (Luke 15:18). The father received the prodigal with open arms, open heart and total forgiveness! The wayward son upon returning home was welcomed with the best robe, a ring on his hand and shoes on his bare feet. The father rejoiced saying, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found..." (Luke 15:24). In most retellings of this parable, the rest of the story dealing with the elder son is often overlooked. However, it is just as important and very vital to the lesson Jesus wished to convey. You see, there were actually two prodigals. One was lost away from home while the other was lost within the home. It is that latter part of the story I wish to deal with today. I give you four talking points in this discussion.

1. Distant from Dad

In Luke 15:25-27 Jesus said, "Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound." Safe and sound is not where the elder brother wanted his younger brother to be! He wanted him gone, removed. No doubt, nothing would have thrilled him more than to hear of his brother's demise. In the ancient Hebrew custom, the elder son was supposed to be the one who hosted such a party, not the Father. The kind of celebration that took place was loud. The affluent father could easily afford professional musicians and the townsfolk would be invited to come join the party and as men (just the men) would interlock arms and dance in a circle, the ladies and the children would surround them and joyfully clap their hands as the men kicked up their heels in joyful exuberance. History says you could hear this kind of merrymaking at a distance of up to one quarter of a mile. The father, however, already perceived

the rotten attitude of the elder brother and knew he could not be trusted to throw this party for the prodigal. The phrase, "Now the elder brother was in the field..." says more than is casually observed. The elder brother was already living this sad distance from Dad. Nobody else knew, but the father knew. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus said, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (Matthew 15:8).

2. The Demarcating Denunciation

Our Lord continued the story and said, "And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him" (Luke 15:28). James 1:20 says, "For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." And there is no exception. The refusal to join into his father's celebration was as insulting as the younger son demanding his inheritance early. The father lowered himself to come out to the young man and intreat him to join in. The word "intreat" can also be translated "pray." Imagine the picture of our Lord praying to us! How humbling is our Lord's love to us! He loved us so much that "...he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8b). The elder brother foolishly "drew a line in the sand" against his own magnanimous loving father by refusing to come and co-host the party observing the younger brother's return. What a sickening contrast to the words of I John 3:14: "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death." How dare this arrogant elder brother! Is there one reading these words that is there? Have you in so many words and actions given God an ultimatum?

3. The Disgusting Disappointment

Look again to our text in Luke 15:29: "And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." The elder brother told a whopper of a lie when he said, "...neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment..." Ecclesiastes 7:20 tells us, "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." He is disappointed with his father for never having given him as much as a goat to celebrate with his friends. There is a subtle reference to his set of friends versus his father's friends. The wise man warned that when your brother is down and hurting, don't kick him while he is down and furthermore, give honor to those whom your father honors. "Thine own friend, and thy father's friend, forsake not; neither go into thy brother's house in the day of thy calamity: for better is a neighbour that is near than a brother far off" (Proverbs 27:10). Oh yes, this elder brother had been living in the father's house but he was far, far from home!

4. The Demoralizing Disdain

In Luke 15:30 our Lord continues the narrative: "But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf." Notice the biting bitter words of the elder brother, "...this thy son..." He places an ever more widening gap between himself and the brother

he should love by defining him as his father's son, not his brother. He brings up the forgiven lifestyle of his brother. He refuses to see him in another light.

According to the custom of the day, there was always a fatted calf available for the elder brother who was next in line for marriage and blessing. The calf was intended for the wedding celebration. It appears the elder son believed everything was going to be his. He was upset because the father was giving his calf to this unworthy younger brother. How foolish! His father was rich; he had plenty of cattle. It would take no time for the father to raise up another fatted calf for his oldest son's future wedding event. When someone is not right with God they cannot think right.

5. The Desired Decision

The elder son is admonished, "And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:31, 32). The father had no intention of robbing the elder son to benefit the younger son. There was enough love, enough mercy, enough grace to go around. God desires all prodigals, those away in a far country and those within the parameters of the church walls to come home. What did the father desire to hear? I believe something like this: "Father, dear Father, I, too, have sinned in being in your house but living with a wicked, selfish heart. Forgive me and please, Father, let me serve the rest of our guests and then allow me to fix up my brother's room for him tonight. If there is anything I can do for you, Father, just let me know. I'm yours!"

Scholars tell us that the biblical writing of the story is actually a poem. This type of writing has eight stanzas or strophes with a parallel matching eight stanzas. Remarkably, the second half of Jesus' story ends with seven stanzas, meaning this is the way the Rabbi's would teach: leaving out the ending, so you would draw your own ending. How would you end this story? Would you end it in repentance and return for both sons or would the elder brother go back into further darkness and disgrace? My prayer is that all prodigals would decide to choose Jesus and walk in the light.

-Pastor Pope-