

The Parables

Part 8 – The Loving Father

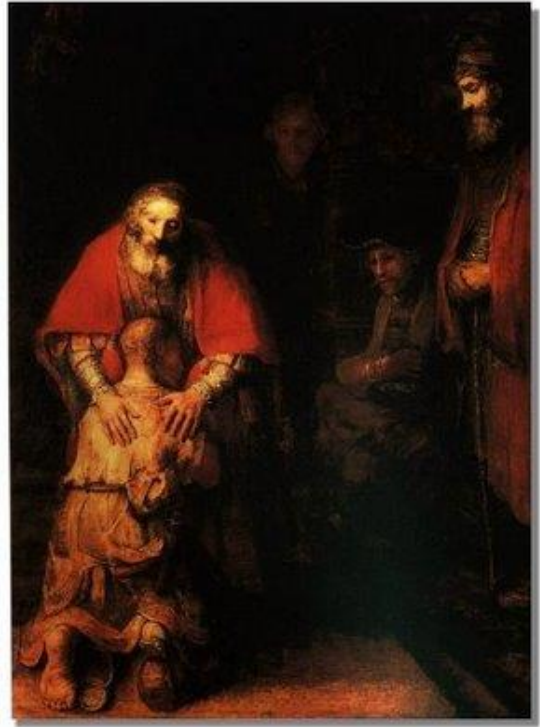
Luke 15:11-32

The Parable of the Loving Father is the third of three parables Jesus employed to explain his attitude toward “tax-collectors and sinners” (15:1-3). All three parables portray the central character as seeking after that which has been lost and rejoicing at its return. Traditionally it has been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. *Prodigal* means someone who is recklessly wasteful.

The prodigal son plays an obviously indispensable role in the parable. Nevertheless it is the father whose pardoning love welcomes back the sinful son who stands at the center of Jesus’ story. The parable is meant to explain and justify God’s attitude toward sinners. It also serves, as Leon Morris points out, to prove that “those who reject repentant sinners are out of line with the Father’s will.”

The younger son corresponds to those who were outcasts among the Jews: tax collectors and sinners.

The older brother corresponds to the scribes and Pharisees. Both are presented as sinners. The younger brother sins through sensual license and materialism. The older brother’s sin is self-righteousness and jealousy. The reader is invited to consider which brother best suits his own sinful tendencies.



Towering at the center of the parable is the father whose love extends equally to both his sons: the wasteful worldling and the smug rule keeper. It must be noted that the father’s celebratory welcome to the younger son is contingent upon the prodigal’s repentance. Likewise the father’s entreaty to his older son is meant to woo him to repentance for the sins to which he remains blind. The older son must understand, as must we all, that he is as much in need of God’s grace as his foolish brother. Followers of Jesus must see that the prodigals of the world are merely sinners of different sort. The well behaved need the redeeming love the Father as desperately as do the world’s prodigals.

Main Idea: God eagerly pardons and redeems any sinner who repents and believes.

1. Sin’s Expressions

a) License

- Vv. 12-13 – The younger son showed appalling disrespect for his father, for the honor of his family, and for his community. His behavior amounted to saying that he wished his father were dead. He had not simply violated the standards of behavior expected of a son; he had broken his relationship with his father. He had proved himself radically selfish. This same selfishness is on display in the sensual license with which he lived in the far country. He followed his sinful appetites.

b) Self-Righteousness

- Vs. 29 – Self-righteousness always seeks to leverage good behavior for some sort of profit. It is also essentially hypocritical. The older son condemned his brother for demanding his rights but now demands them for himself.

- The obedience which he was so proud of he now unwittingly reveals to have been motivated by self-interest, not by love or gratitude.
- He seems to care nothing for the fact that his refusal to enter the feast amounts to a public insult to his father as any Middle-Eastern reader immediately recognizes. The older brother wants his brother disowned, not welcomed.
- Vs. 30 – The self-righteous always measure themselves against the worst of sinners.

2. Sin's Consequences

a) Ruin

- Vv. 14-16 – The realization of one's real need does not often come quickly. Being broke during a famine was still not enough to bring this fellow to his senses. He still thought he could solve his problem. The younger brother's sin had brought him to the pigsty.
- Feeding pigs was a job no Jew and no middle easterner would have ever wanted to do. As Bailey notes, "The Middle East still detests the pig: the Muslim and the Jew by the dictates of religion, the Christian, for the most part, by choice." Nothing could be more degrading for a Jew than to care for a Gentile's pigs! The younger son's ruin is complete.

b) Alienation

- Vs. 28 – The older brother's refusal to enter the banquet in the Middle East was an insult to his father and his guests. He was furious about what his father had done. But in a very significant and ironic twist the insider has become the outsider. "The older brother contrived, without leaving home, to be further away from his father than his brother had been in the heathen pigsty!" (R. Rayburn).

3. Sin's Remedy

The pardoning love of God is sin's only remedy and the sinner's only hope. There are two necessary responses the sinner must make in response to God's love:

a) Repentance

- Vs.16 – Desperate circumstances had finally brought him to the realization that there was only one place where he was likely to find help and that was with his father, the very father he had so terribly betrayed. He knew he had forfeited all his rights, but he could appeal to his father's mercy. He would ask to be made simply a day-laborer, the lowest of the three classes of farm laborers. [Bock, ii, 1313]

b) Faith

- It was not Jesus' intention in this parable to give comprehensive instruction concerning the atonement. His goal was to highlight the love of the Father. However, it is clear in the younger son's return home that he believed that his father's goodness was expansive enough to perhaps receive him back. His return home after all he had done was an indication that the son knew his father, knew what he was like, knew his character. He knew him to be a merciful man!
- Vs. 24 – The banquet restores the son not only to the immediate family but to the village, the larger community that would have been acutely aware of his treason and disgusted by it.