

The Father of the Lost Son

Luke 15:11-24

Intro

A Sunday School teacher taught the parable of the prodigal son and asked her class a question to see if they were paying attention. She asked, "Who was most unhappy when the prodigal son returned home?" A little boy eagerly answered, "The fatted calf!"

The parable of the prodigal son has been called the greatest short story in the world. It is the finest of all the parables and certainly among the best loved. Its details are vivid as they reflect actual customs and build up the story's emotional and spiritual impact. The central character in this parable is the father and perhaps it should really be called "The Parable of a Loving Patient Father".

Context of the Parable

Jesus is traveling through the countryside near Jerusalem and many people were following Him. At one point some tax collectors and "sinners" were gathering around to hear Him. But some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law were murmuring and complaining that Jesus was hanging around with the social outcasts and sinners (Luke 14:25; 15:1). It is on this occasion that Jesus teaches about the way God sees the outcasts and sinners unlike the religious people of his day. Here, Jesus shows God's pardoning love. It is this love that the human heart responds to. It is a powerful message of the Father's forgiving love for sinners.

This parable is packed with so much meaning and many perspectives that I am going to mainly focus on the character of the father. The father is the central figure in this story; he is the hero. In this story Jesus is revealing to us who God the Father is. I can imagine that the religious folk were blown away with Jesus' revelation of what God is like.

The Rebellious Young Son

Tired of the disciplined life, the younger son wanted to stretch out his wings and have a fling with the things of the world. According to the customs of the Middle East, demanding an early inheritance was a show of great disrespect to one's father. It was the equivalent of a death wish. But the father was gracious and gave him his inheritance. The younger son was heartless and insensitive in the request he made of his father. In effect he said, "Give me now my part of your estate that I will get anyway when you are dead, and I want to get out and do my own thing."

The father didn't argue but he knew that if the son was ever to learn he must learn the hard way. This foolish son wasted all his inheritance on loose reckless immoral living. He eventually hits bottom in the most terrible of times, a famine, when it is most difficult to find employment. His new job was caring for pigs and he was so broke that he was eating their food. That was the most deplorable thing to do because to a religious Jew, pigs were unclean and forbidden to touch (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8). How low can you go!

But in the story we learn that "*He came to his senses.*" Hardship has a wonderful way of bringing people to face the facts. It smartens you up! He realized that his sin was first against "heaven", referring to God. Also he sinned against his father; he failed to honour his parent according to the commandment.

But I would like to focus on the father because in essence he is the central character. Through the three parables in Luke 15; the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son; Jesus' main teaching is on an attribute of God that is so much overlooked. That attribute is joy. God, who is by nature Saviour brings himself everlasting joy in recovering the lost. Jesus emphatically teaches this in the 3 parables of Luke 15. He said, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7, 10).

Nine Things we learn about the Father (Luke 15: 20, 22-24)

In Luke 15, verses 20 and 22 to 24 we learn 9 things about the father and what he does.

1/ Father sees his son and was filled with compassion

This indicates that the father had been watching, waiting and suffering in silence hoping that one day his lost son would return. The father's patience is incredible. We don't know how long the son was away and lost in the world but we know that the father waited with expectation. The Bible says this about God, "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9).

We also learn that the father was filled with compassion. The word compassion obviously defies adequate translation. What it means is that the suffering and sin and abandonment and peril of the son not merely went to the heart of the father, but right into His heart, into himself, so that his whole plight was now the father's own, and as such the father saw and suffered it far more keenly than his son did. Compassion means that the father took his son's misery upon himself, in a sense taking it away from him and making it his own.

Feeling compassion isn't some kind of lovey-dovey sensation or just feeling pity. Compassion goes straight into the heart and will create a gut-wrenching feeling in which we empathetically identify with the brokenness of another person. Those who choose apathy are choosing to be emotionally absent. Those who choose compassion are choosing to become emotionally vulnerable.

Look at Psalm 103:8-13 we see. It says, "*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. ⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; ¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.*" That's who God the Father is, a God filled with compassion and love for us.

2/ Father runs to his son

The next thing we learn is that the father runs. Why does the father run to his son? The first thing you have to understand is that in biblical times a man never, never ran. If he were to run, he would have to pull up his tunic (his robe) and tie it up so he wouldn't trip. If he did this, it would show his bare legs and in that time and culture, it was humiliating and shameful for any person to show their bare legs. Therefore if it was shameful for a man to run in that culture and show his legs, why did the father run when his son returned to him? What made him humiliate and shame himself?

In biblical times if a Jewish son lost his inheritance among the Gentiles, and then returned home, the community would perform a ceremony, called the *kezazah*. In this ceremony they would break a large pot in front of him and yell, “*You are now cut off from your people!*” It was a way to let everyone know that this person was rejected by the whole community and he or she would never again be welcome.

But notice what Jesus said, the father runs to his son and shames himself in order to get to his son before the community gets to him, so that his son does not experience the shame. So it became clear that there would be no *kezazah* ceremony. There would be no rejection of his son even despite what he had done. The son repented and returned to the father. The father had taken the full shame that should have fallen upon his son and clearly showed the entire community that his son was welcome back home.

This is what our Heavenly Father did. He took our shame through his Son, Jesus Christ, who willingly endured the cross on our behalf and took our sin’s shame to free us from it. As a result we are forgiven, accepted and reconciled. We do not have to fear going home to our Father and confessing our sins, no matter what we have done, or how many times we have done it.

In this parable we learn that only the father can restore the son to full sonship in the family. In our case, as sinners there is nothing that we can do to restore our lost relationship with God the Father. Not only does God forgive us, but he takes upon himself our shame. He lifts off that weight that we carry for our sins, mistakes, and cleans us up.

3/ Father throws his arms around his son and kisses him

First of all we know that the son was absolutely financially broke and worked among the pigs. He was dirty and filthy, probably with pig manure. Can you imagine how the religious folk felt upon hearing of the father embracing his dirty son? To be with pigs and work with them and eat their food was the most deplorable thing for a religious Jew. A pig was considered the most unclean animal in biblical times. As a matter of fact there was a rabbinic saying that said, “Cursed is he who feeds swine.” And also according to Leviticus 11:7 they were unclean. Therefore the father hugging and kissing his son would have many of the religious folk sick to their stomachs. BUT that gesture of acceptance, love and forgiveness would have further shocked the scribes and Pharisees. In this father we see Christ who came to earth and bore the shame and humility to embrace repentant sinners. That’s God’s love.

4/ Father has a robe put on him

The robe was a sign of favoured position and it was given to a guest or person of honour during those times. In Isaiah 61:10 we read, “*I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*” That robe symbolizes God taking our filthy sins away and placing His righteousness on us. We are made clean and acceptable to God through Christ.

5/ Father has a ring put on his finger

The ring signified authority and which bore the family crest. The ring signified the privileges, and rights placed on his son. The lost son was restored to his rightful position, not as a slave but as a son.

6/ Father has sandals put on his feet

In those days slaves did not wear sandals only a free person did. Thus the sandals symbolized the lost son's full restoration to sonship. Romans 8:15-17 teaches, "*The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."* The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." We, as believers, are not only sons and daughters of God but heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We have the privileges and rights.

7/ Father has a fattened calf prepared

The fattened calf was often reserved for an important person (1 Samuel 28:24). It was one of the most delicious and extravagant meals that could feed many people and many guests would be invited. By ordering the servants to prepare the fattened calf, the father was showing how important his son had become.

8/ Father puts on a feast and celebration

Celebration, music, dancing, true happiness the world cannot offer, the bliss of heaven. The feast was for the lost son; a celebration for one who was lost but now is found. This brings God much joy when a sinner repents and comes home. Heaven rejoices and celebrates. Here again Jesus is emphasizing the fact that there is much rejoicing and celebration in heaven over one sinner who repents.

9/ Father says that his son was dead but was alive; was lost and is found

The words "dead" and "alive", "lost and "found", are terms that apply to one's state before and after conversion to Christ. We read in Ephesians 2:1-5, "*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*"

Conclusion

Religion is humanity trying to reach to God but the Gospel is God reaching to humanity. It was the Father who ran to his repentant son and embraced him and kissed him. WOW! What love! This parable shows the beauty and wonder of the father-heart of God. It causes one to worship and praise this awesome loving God.

There's a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: "*Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.*" On Saturday about

800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers. (Source: Bits and Pieces, Oct. 15, 1992, pg. 13).

There are so many people in this world that are looking for love and acceptance especially from God. Often their concept and image of God has been distorted and they view Him as an angry father who only wants to judge and condemn. We do not have to fear going home to our Father and confessing our sins, no matter what we have done, or how many times we have done it. Our heavenly Father has taken our shame through his Son, Jesus, who willingly endured the cross on our behalf. He took our sins' shame so that we would not have to. As a result, we can be forgiven, restored and accepted. May we experience what the prodigal son encountered when he returned to the 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”* (Luke 15:20).