

A FAMILY OF PRODIGALS (Luke 15:11-32)

I once read that each generation must grow its own corn and write its own stories. Often, the stories that are newly written are simply old stories dressed in contemporary clothing.

In 1976, I was a 6th grader at Herbert Hoover Middle School in OKC. Mrs. Bower was my homeroom teacher. She taught Language Arts. She showed a film in class one day. This was long before video streaming, and Blue Ray, and DVD's. We didn't even have VCR's yet. Film projectors is what we had.

She showed a film that was originally released in 1937. The star of the movie was a little girl with blonde curls. Her name was Shirley Temple, and the name of the movie was Heidi. It was based on a book of the same name written by a Swiss author named Johanna Spyri.

Heidi is the story of an orphan girl who is taken to live with her grandfather in the Swiss Alps. He is a hermit who initially doesn't want to be saddled with the responsibility of raising his granddaughter, but the more time he spends with her, the fonder he becomes of her. Due to her influence, he returns to the church and the village that he left years before.

You might think that they don't make movies like *Heidi* anymore, and there is real sense in which they don't. But it is also true that the story line of Heidi shows up again and again in both film and print.

Heidi borrows heavily from a story that Jesus told. In fact, this story of Jesus is Heidi's favorite story. She reads it often, and she even reads it to her grandfather. After having done so, Spyri wrote:

A few hours later, when Heidi had long been in deep sleep, her grandfather climbed the little ladder; he put his lamp beside Heidi's bed so that the light fell on the sleeping child. She lay there with folded hands, for Heidi had not forgotten to pray. On her rosy face was an expression of peace and blessed trust that must have appealed to her grandfather, for he stood there a long, long time without moving or taking his eyes from the sleeping child. Then, he too, folded his hands and half aloud, with bowed head, said: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son!" and great tears rolled down his cheeks.

The next day, which was Sunday, the grandfather, to the surprise of everyone, took Heidi to church in town and told both the pastor and many within the congregation that he and Heidi would be moving to town for the winter.

Heidi is the story of the prodigal son retold. The story of the prodigal son is a timeless story that has as much dramatic power today as it did when Jesus first told it.

Here at the outset, let me make it clear that according to the dictionary, the word *prodigal* does not mean *rebel*. It doesn't mean, "a person who wanders from the faith."

You don't have to be rebellious to be prodigal. The word *prodigal* actually means *lavish, extravagant, to spend to the point of being wasteful*.

Let's read the story. It is found in Luke 15:11-32. It is important to remember that this is the third of three stories Jesus told. Each story deals with something that was lost and then was found and the joy that was experienced when that which was lost was found. First it was a sheep, then a coin, and finally a son. Later, we will look at what occasioned these three stories.

As we consider this story we will begin with the younger son, move to the elder son, and conclude with the father.

I. SOME PRODIGALS LIVE THE LIFESTYLE OF THE YOUNGER BROTHER—the Party Animal.

We are not told specifically why the younger son wanted to leave home. That is left to our own imagination. Maybe he felt he had too many responsibilities, too many chores, and he didn't want to work his life away. Maybe he thought his dad was too strict, that his dad was holding him back, and he wanted to go out and give free reign to his passions. I think he was tired of living in the shadow of his older brother, the good son, who was always perfect.

We don't know why he wanted to go, but we do know that one day he went to his father and basically said, "I don't want to have to wait until you die to get what's coming to me; I want it now while I can really enjoy it."

Amazingly, the father agrees to make the deal. He gave his son the cash value of one-third of his estate. Jewish law stipulated that the elder son would get two-thirds. With a bag full of money and a head full of dreams, the boy left home. The father quietly hoped that the road which led his son away from home would one day bring him back.

The boy, however, was intent upon enjoying his new-found wealth and his new-found freedom. By the way, the two are dangerous in combination. Some have the money to indulge their passions, but they do not feel a freedom to do so. Some have the inclination, but they lack the resources. The boy had both—the money and the desire. He moved to a distant place and lived it up. He spent his money like there was no tomorrow. His money bought him friends, wine, women, and a good time. One man wrote, "He has no responsibility except to pay the tab at the end of the evening." He was more than happy to do that.

One morning, however, he awoke to discover that all the money was gone, and when his friends learned that the money had disappeared, so did they. About the time the money had all been spent, a famine hit the land. Since the boy didn't have much education, he had to look for manual labor, and the only job he could get was that of feeding pigs, which wasn't exactly the dream job for a Jewish boy. When hunger and desperation intersect, you will do just about anything, even things you didn't think you would ever do.

One preacher said, "There, in the pigsty with an empty purse and an empty belly, he begins to take stock of his empty life." We are told in v.17, "he came to himself."

Another version reads, “he came to his senses.”

Before he left home, the prodigal wanted His Father’s wealth, but He didn’t want His Father. Are we ever like that? Do you want what God’s gifts but you but aren’t that interested in establishing a growing relationship with God?

And what are you doing with His gifts? Are you wasting them? Our Heavenly Father has blessed us with incredible riches. What are we doing with what He has placed in our hand and put at our disposal? If you are a Christian, God has given you a spiritual gift that you are to use to serve God and be a blessing to His Church. Are you using it, or are you wasting it?

God has given you the privilege of prayer. Are you using it or wasting it?

God has given you the Bible. Are you reading it, studying it, seeking to know it and live by it? Or are you wasting that precious gift through neglect?

God has given you a church home. Are you supporting it with your attendance, your giving, and your involvement? Or do you come when you get around to it, give when you have a little extra, and serve only when you really feel like it?

What are you doing with the disposable income God has placed in your hand? Are you investing it to make a difference in the lives of others or only spending it on yourself?

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, “The Possessor of heaven and earth placed you here, not as a proprietor, but as a steward.”

The problem with being a prodigal is that prodigals spend all of what they have on themselves.

It was only when the younger son came to himself that he was able to go back to the Father. He meant to go back as a servant, but the Father made him a son again. Is it time to go back to the Father? Is it time to come home? Don’t put it off. Come back now. The Father wants you to come back. When the son in our story came back, the father restored him. When you come back to God and confess your sin of wasting what He has so graciously given you, He will restore you, too.

Before we concentrate upon the father, let’s learn what we can from the actions of the older brother.

II. SOME PRODIGALS HAVE THE MINDSET OF THE ELDER BROTHER— the Party Pooper.

When the younger son came back and the father threw him a party, you would have thought that everybody was happy, everybody that is except the fattened calf. Such wasn’t the case. The elder son wasn’t happy at all. He was resentful and bitter.

Why do people get that way? Ray Stedman pointed out three reasons.

First, they think they are being ignored and treated unfairly. The elder son said that he never got a dinner. His comment reminds me of the comedian Red Buttons. If you are old enough to remember the Dean Martin Roasts of the late 70’s, you might remember how Red Buttons would always complain about those well-deserving people who never got a dinner.

There are many people who go through life complaining that they never got what someone else got.

Second, those who are bitter often have an over-inflated view of themselves. The elder son in our story focused on what he had done for his father without ever stopping to consider what his father had done for him. It is interesting that those who are most resentful are also those who are most self-righteous.

The third characteristic of the bitter is that they are contemptuous of others. Instead of saying, “My brother,” he said, “This son of yours” (v. 30).

We need to remember what it was that occasioned this parable. Look at Luke 15:1-3. Jesus put his audience in the story. He cast them as the elder brother.

The younger brother had left the father’s house, but the elder brother had departed from the father’s heart. By the end of the story, the younger brother is back inside the house, and the elder brother is the one who is on the outside. Bitterness, jealousy, and anger towards others will always leave you on the outside looking in. The sins of the spirit are worse than sins of the flesh.

It is the sins of the spirit that Christians are most likely to commit. We become harsh, critical, judgmental, and legalistic. In addition to being critical of the lost, we are even critical of the saved.

Have we not become prodigals? We have wasted the father’s love by not be willing to share it.

Some view this parable as very dangerous. Listen to what Robert Farrar Capon wrote:

You’re worried about permissiveness—about the way the preaching of grace seems to say it’s okay to do all kinds of terrible things as long as you just walk in afterward and take the free gift of God’s forgiveness . . .

While you and I may be worried about seeming to give permission, Jesus apparently wasn’t. He wasn’t afraid of giving the prodigal son a kiss instead of a lecture, a party instead of probation; and He proved that by bringing in the elder brother at the end of the story and having him raise pretty much the same objections you do. He’s angry about the party. He complains that his father is lowering standards and ignoring virtue—that music, dancing, and a fattened calf are, in effect, just so many permissions to break the law. And to that, Jesus has the father say only one thing: “Cut that out! We’re not playing good boys and bad boys any more. Your brother was dead and he’s alive again. The name of the game from now on is resurrection, not bookkeeping.”

Quit keeping score of those who have wronged you or done wrong. That’s not what being a Christian is all about.

The prophet Micah wrote, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

That’s what God wants. He wants us to do what is right, to be merciful to others, and to be humble. When we turn away from mercy and become proud then we wander away from God’s heart, and we become prodigals.

We are not told how the story ends. It is left open-ended as to whether or not the elder brother finally came into the house. I believe that was intentional. We get to decide how the story will end in our case. Will we continue to harbor resentment, or will we align ourselves with the Father's heart?

So far, we have seen that both sons were prodigals in their own way. The younger wasted his father's wealth while the elder one wasted his father's love. We come to a third truth.

III. ALL OF US NEED WHAT'S OFFERED BY OUR PRODIGAL FATHER— the Party Giver.

The word *prodigal* means *to spend lavishly*. It is where we get the word *prodigious*, which means *enormous*. The father in the story, who represents God, was liberal and generous with the expenditure of his grace. So it is with God. Consider what He has done for us in Christ. The boundaries of His grace are enormous.

The father was gracious to both the younger son and the elder son. When the younger son came back, the father did not set down conditions that had to be met before the son would be allowed back in the house. He didn't lecture him and say, "I knew you would come crawling back someday."

Look at v. 20. I believe the father was looking for His son, and God is looking for you and me to return if we have left His house. Notice also that this verse says he was filled with *compassion* for his son. Although this is a Greek word, the Hebrew word for *compassion* comes from a word that means *womb*. As the womb of the mother cherishes the fetus, so God cherishes us who belong to Him. The next thing the father did was to run to his son. In the Jewish culture of that day, adult men did not run. That was not a respectable thing to do. At this point the father did not care about etiquette. All he cared about was that his son had come home. The final thing the father did in v. 20 was to cover his son with kisses. The verb used for *kissed* in that verse was a word that denoted frequent and repeated kisses. This wasn't just a peck on the cheek.

On Mother's Day we looked at, "The Mothering Love of Our Heavenly Father." God's love for us resembles a mother's love for her child. The God to whom we are to come is a God who is looking for us, who is filled with compassion, who runs to us, and who covers us with His affection when we come.

As soon as the son returned, his father lavished him with gracious gifts:

- The son had lost his dignity feeding the pigs, but the father covers him with a robe of honor.
- The young man's feet are bare, but the father has the sandals of sonhood placed upon them.
- The son had squandered his inheritance, but the father gives him a ring that returns to him to his original place in the family business.

Best of all, the father threw a party for his son. Scripture teaches that at the end of time, God is going to hold a party for His Son. It is not a welcome home party; it is a

wedding party—a wedding feast. You’ve been invited. It is going to be a feast to end all feasts. It is a party you don’t want to miss.

The father was also gracious to the elder son. He went to his son and pled with him to come into the house. He didn’t demand it, but He assured the son of his love and explained why it was important that the whole family celebrate. He reminded his son that it was his brother who was dead and now is alive.

God isn’t going to make us be gracious to one another, but it hurts His heart when we are not.

Some years ago, songwriter Benny Hester composed a song. I want you to close your eyes, and as I read the words, I want you to imagine experiencing what the song describes.

Almighty God, the Great I Am,
Immovable Rock, Omnipotent, Powerful,
Awesome Lord.
Victorious Warrior, Commanding King of Kings,
Mighty Conqueror and the only time,
The only time I ever saw him run,
Was when

He ran to me,
He took me in His arms,
Held my head to His chest,
Said “My son's come home again!”
Lifted my face,
Wiped the tears from my eyes,
With forgiveness in His voice He said
“Son, do you know I still love You?”

He caught me by surprise, When God ran

The day I left home,
I knew I’d broken His heart.
And I wondered then, if things could ever be the same.
Then one night,
I remembered His love for me.
And down that dusty road, ahead I could see,
It was the only time,
It was the only time I ever saw Him run.

He caught me by surprise.
And He brought me to my knees.
When God ran, I saw Him run to me.

I was so ashamed, all alone, and so far away.
But now I know, that He’s been waiting for this day

He ran to me,
He took me in His arms,
Held my head to his chest,
Said "My son's come home again!"
Lifted my face,
Wiped the tears from my eyes,
With forgiveness in His voice
He said "Son"
He called me Son.
He said "Son, do you know I still love you?"
He ran to me

And God will run to you if you will simply take a step toward Him. By doing so, you will find the party you always wanted.