

Luke 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:3 So he told them this parable:

Luke 15:11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

A PARABLE WITH PROBLEMS

Do you like the parable of the Prodigal Son? The answer to that question depends upon your background.

This past week I got a surprise visit. Jack Francis was in town to see his doctor. He and his nurse came by the office and we talked a while. Jack has changed a lot physically since he had his stroke, but his mind and keen wit are as sharp as ever.

I told him that I was preaching on the parable of the prodigal son. I asked him who he identified with in the parable and Jack said,

“I’m not sure who I identify with but I can tell you who I would like to be. I would like to be the Prodigal. He got everything he ever wanted, and didn’t have to take responsibility for what he had done.”

I would be hard pressed to disagree with that.

If you are an older brother or an older sister who saw your younger siblings get away with murder, you probably don’t like the parable of the Prodigal. In fact you may even want to say,

“That’s what’s wrong with our society right now. Parents don’t discipline their kids, and our society is “going down the tubes” because of that lack of discipline.”

Yes, if you are an older brother or sister, this story is going to make you very, very angry. I know about being an older brother. I am one.

And what about you parents who have had real live prodigal sons and daughters? You’re not going to like this story very much either. You know that the story is not over. When the party is finally finished, guess what this young son is going to do in a couple weeks?

He’s going to say to himself,

“You know, this old man of mine is pretty gullible. Maybe he’ll give me some money to invest in pork belly futures. And before you know it he’ll be in the far country again.”

No, if you’ve ever had a prodigal son or daughter, you’re not going to like this story at all.

When you think about it, the only one who should like this story are those of you who are prodigal sons and daughters. I won’t ask for a show of hands. I know who you are.

Have you been disrespectful to your parents? Have you lost the family fortune investing in the Miami condo market? Have no fear. This passage seems to suggest you can come on home with no questions asked.

Come to think of it I don’t like this story very much either.

Do you know what I would do if my young son said to me,

“Pop, you and mom are living way too long. I know you always wanted to take that cruise to Hawaii, but I need that money to start my own business in Pakistan. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll take my money now.”

I would have a response, but it wouldn’t be the response of the father in our parable for today. In fact, most of my speech would not be fit for public consumption. The father in our story for today should be arrested for parental malpractice.

What kind of father risks the well being of his entire family because junior has need to go to the far country and prove himself?

### ANCIENT FAMILY LIFE

Of course that’s exactly the question that those who first heard this parable were asking as well. In Jesus’ day the father of the family was a lot like the father in that movie, *The Godfather*.

(For those of you who aren’t into gangster movies, just let me say that whatever the father said in that family was law. When this father made them an offer, they didn’t refuse! No one would dare cross the father. If they did, it could be very bad for your health.)

Well, in the patriarchal society of the Bible it was the same. Whatever the father said was law. The small communities of the ancient world relied upon each other, and it was important that they maintain order and discipline. If one family didn’t have their house in order it affected the peace and security of the entire community.

When the father of the family did finally die most of his estate went to his oldest son. There was a reason for this. Along with his inheritance the eldest son had the responsibility to take care of his mother, his sisters and his younger brothers.

So, now we see that this story not only seems crazy in our day and time; it seems even more crazy in Jesus’ day and time. It’s absolutely bizarre.

That’s why everyone was always so flabbergasted by what Jesus had to say. It was never what they expected. In fact I am sure that many people became angry when Jesus first told this story.

### THE PRODIGAL GOD

It’s important, no it’s vital to remember that this story is a parable. In a parable there is only one main point, and that point is almost always about the kingdom of God.

This story is not about how to be a good parent or a bad parent. This story is not about the escapades of a wild younger brother or the graceless ways of a snarly older brother.

This is a story about God.

And who represents God in this story? It is the father. The father is at the center of this story. It is he who drives the action. The two sons are merely supporting characters, what one commentator called “vivid contrasts to the father.”

In fact, I think this story is poorly named. We shouldn't call it the parable of the prodigal son. It should be called the parable of the Prodigal God. (By the way this idea is not original with me. It comes from a sermon by Lloyd Ogilve, the former chaplain of the Senate.)

Anyway prodigal means lavish and unrestrained. And that describes this father. His love knew no restraint; his love knew no boundaries. He had a prodigal love for the one that was lost.

This is no ordinary father. We have not seen the likes of him before Jesus' time or after. The God revealed in this parable is willing to give up everything for his children.

And soon the teller of this parable, the Son of God will even give up his own life on the tree of Calvary. He will be murdered by people he loved and came to save.

Is that wasteful? Is that extravagant? You bet. Was it necessary? Yes it was. Only an extravagant Father, a Prodigal God would be willing to waste time and effort on sinners like us.

#### TOTAL DEPRAVITY

The theological term we use to describe our sinfulness is total depravity.

Now that sounds a bit harsh. I might need to be tweaked a bit here and there but am I totally depraved?

I don't think so. I'm not spending time in the far country with the pigs. I'm a good boy. I work hard every day. I pay my taxes and I've paid my dues. My younger brother ... he might be totally depraved, but not me.

And that's the problem. We've been comparing ourselves to that wild younger brother.

Yes, compared to a criminal I look pretty good. Compared the love and grace of God I look really bad.

The apostle Paul said, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The prophet Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray.” Our supposed good works are like filthy rags in God's eyes. (Isaiah 53:6, 64:6; Romans 3:23)

The story is the same from the Garden of Eden to the present day. We reject the love of the Father. We may be a young son who has gone far from home or we may be an older brother who has worked dutifully every day.

But the fact of the matter is this: the far country is in our hearts and minds. All of us in one way or another have spurned the love of the Father.

This is the real difficulty with this parable.

Many of us don't know that we're in the far country. Many of us don't believe that we're sinners. Many of us don't believe that we fall short of God's glory.

And that keeps us from hearing this parable as a word of grace and salvation.

## THE CONTEXT

Look at the context of this passage. You may have noticed that we began today's reading with Luke 15:1-3 and then skipped all the way up to Luke 15:11-32.

Why did we do that? Well verses one through three give us the context for this parable. Verses one through three tell us why Jesus told this story.

In those verses the religious leaders, the Scribes and the Pharisees are being very critical of Jesus. The tax collectors and other sinners are coming close to Jesus in order to hear his teaching.

And these religious folk are flustered by this.

They say, "Jesus don't you know that one rotten apple spoils the barrel?" And then they turn to the crowd and say, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Now the religious leaders wouldn't have had a problem with Jesus if he had been more like John the Baptist on this point. If Jesus had pointed a long bony finger at these sinners and told them to repent, they would have all nodded in approval.

"Yes, these bad boys need to repent because they are headed for perdition."

But, Jesus doesn't do that. Jesus gets close to the sinners. He invites them over for Sunday dinner.

## ONE GOOD APPLE RESTORES THE BARREL

It's interesting that in the parable the Father threw a party when the prodigal son returned home. And it was this that offended the older brother more than anything else.

It would be okay to let the older brother come home and eventually be restored by proving his worth. There are clear provisions in the Jewish faith for restoring the penitent returnee.

But, nowhere does it say that the penitent is to be received with music and dancing. The prodigal can return, but he needs to show that he is sorry.

Let him return to bread and water and not the fatted calf Let him return to sackcloth and ashes and not a new robe and ring.

If the religious leaders were angry with Jesus before, after hearing this parable they would have been livid. As it is written in other passages, they would have known that Jesus was directing this parable at them.

If only the religious leaders, those elder brothers who had worked so hard to do God's will could have seen the truth. Jesus was not just another rabbi. Jesus was God in the flesh.

Yes, it is true that in most cases one rotten apple spoils the barrel. But, in the case of Jesus one good apple can transform a barrel of rotten apples into good ones.

And what these religious leaders don't know is this. In one way or another all of us are rotten apples. We can be rotten by running away from God and wasting the good gifts that God has given us. Or we can be rotten by staying at home and taking God's gifts for granted.

In either case the outcome is the same. We are rotten. And we need Jesus to come close to us. We need a Savior. We need Jesus to touch us and make us clean.

### GOOD CHURCH FOLK

Whenever you read about the Scribes and Pharisees in the Bible, mentally replace "Scribes and Pharisees" with the phrase "good church folk" and you will better get the gist of what Jesus is saying.

Oddly enough religious people are often what Mark Twain called "good people in the worst sense of the word." Religious people can be very judgmental and self-righteous. We can be so angry at the younger brothers in our world that we cannot see our own sin.

And tragically this prevents us from understanding the lavish love and grace of the Father. We think that salvation needs to be earned and yet all the while everything that we would ever need is given to us.

All we have to do is accept the fact that salvation is by grace alone. Salvation come from the hand of our Heavenly Father who owns everything and from no other source.

We good church folk need salvation too you know.

And if we are angered by the grace of the heavenly Father we need to ask ourselves, "Why? Could there be a need in our own life that is not being met? Is there someone that we need to forgive in order to move on in our journey of faith?"

One commentator wrote, "In the world of the parable, one cannot be a son without also being a brother." Once again we see the horizontal and vertical dimensions of grace. Bountiful grace comes from our heavenly Father, but it must be expressed in concrete situations here on earth to become a reality.

### THE RUNNING FATHER

The father in our parable for today has two sons, and he loves both of them. He loves both of them so much that he willing to sacrifice his honor, his place in the family and his place in the community, in order to embrace his sons.

Notice that when the prodigal son returns home the father runs to meet him. I am told that in some translations of the Bible in the Middle East this is left out.

A father running in public like this is a great disgrace. Girls might run to meet someone returning home, but not the head of the household. But, in Jesus' parable the father does not worry about his honor. His love for the son who was lost and now is found overwhelms everything.

And toward the end of the parable when the older son refuses to join the party, the father comes running once more. He doesn't command the older son to join the party. Instead, he goes out and pleads with the older son to join the party.

Once again the father does not worry about his honor. His honor is overcome by his love for the eldest son.

Does the older son join the party? The text doesn't say. And maybe that's the point. This parable is not so much about calling sinners to repentance. This parable is about calling the "righteous" to join the celebration.

Joining the celebration is all important. The father told his older son that everything was already his. It was not earned by his hard work. It was a gift of grace.

If the older son joins the party he will show by his action that he understands. If he refuses to join the party he will show that he thinks that he has earned his place in life ... that he is living by merit instead of mercy.

#### THE INVITATION OF A PRODIGAL GOD

If we find God's mercy offensive, we cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. And in this way we exclude ourselves from God's grace.

The salvation of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is all about becoming a new creation. We can't stay the way we are if are to follow Jesus.

Sometimes we have to make sacrifices in order to follow Jesus. Sometimes, like the father we have to sacrifice fields that have been in the family forever. And sometimes, like the father we have to sacrifice things like honor, rightness and self-respect.

Sometimes you have to run like a girl to protect the ones you love ... even those who harmed you in terrible ways.

But, in Jesus' world, the world of the Prodigal God ... love is lavish and steadfast ... even when the object of that love is foolish and stubborn.

I like the way Barbara Brown Taylor put it in a sermon on this passage. She wrote,

“The father makes this case to his good son, who is as pig-headed as his bad son, but it is not clear that this child buys his argument.

It feels good to stand in the yard, after all, even when that dishonors the family and divides the village. It feels good to know who's right, who's wrong, and which one you are, even when that shames your father and breaks his heart, causing him to die a little right before your eyes.

Meanwhile, there is a banquet going on. You can hear the music and the dancing even out in the yard, and there is plenty left to eat. Your father won't make you go in the house.

He'll just stand in the yard with you to protect you, the same way he protected your brother. What's left of his honor is in your hands.

You can go to the party as you are, as long as you don't insist on staying that way.”

What about you?

What's keeping you from joining the party?

Our Prodigal God stands with you no matter where you are. Our Prodigal God reminds you that in His house there is grace enough for all.

Amen.