



HG16: The Parables Of Jesus 'The Parable Of The Prodigal Son'

Luke 15:11-31

Home Group Sermon Notes

12th July 2009 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction: In Luke 15 Jesus teaches three parables about things that have been lost: the lost sheep (1-7); the lost coin (8-10); and the lost son (11-32) also known as the Prodigal Son. I guess this parable could be preached from three perspectives: Father, Son and Older Brother. However, I'm going to focus on the father and catch a glimpse into heart of God that Jesus gives us.

He is a God who grieves for us: According to Jewish law, an elder son received twice as much as the other sons (Deuteronomy 21:17), and a father could distribute his wealth during his lifetime if he so wished. It was perfectly legal for the younger son to ask for his share of the estate and even to sell it, but it wasn't a very loving thing to do on his part. For years, when reading this story, I always felt sorry for the son. As a son myself, I related to his desire to spread his wings. I understood something of his quest to try something new. I recognised something of myself when he moved to a 'distant country.' Now, the distant country isn't necessarily a place we travel to get to, because the distant country exists in all of our hearts – a place where we think the grass is greener! At times, I almost wanted to shout to him not to do the things that he did when he squandered his inheritance. He finds that life in the distant country wasn't what he expected it to be. And who couldn't fail to feel sorry for the son when he ends up at a pig farm feeding pigs - talk about an insult - even those ceremonially unclean animals received a better diet than he did! The son dreamed of enjoying his freedom in the distant country, away from his father (and older brother) but it didn't work out that way. I've always felt sorry for the son.

That was until I read it again, as a father, and now I feel sorry for the father! Who is it, in this story, who hurts the most? Who has the greatest capacity for hurt? It's the father. There's something both wonderful and un-wonderful about love. It makes us vulnerable to pain and puts us at the mercy of hurt. Yes, the son is suffering, there's no doubt about that, but it's nothing compared with the suffering of his father. The only person in the Bible who called God, Father, is Jesus. Have you noticed, though, that the Bible never speaks of God *becoming* our Father? It speaks of us becoming His children, but never vice-versa. There is a very real sense that He has *always* been our Father, but we have not always been His children.

He is a God who loves us unconditionally: Children can bring both joy and sorrow into our lives; it's true isn't it? Most parents will understand when I say that there is pain in bringing children *into* the world, but there is pain in bringing children *up* into the world. However, there will never be a time when I'll be free from the hurt of my children. I'll always be their father. Whether children are 6 or 60, parents will always feel responsible for them. But, it seems to me, that parents often carry a guilt that they have no right to bear. Children make their own choices and, it seems to me, that we can't be held accountable, or indeed, responsible, for them. That's not to say they've been perfect parents ... they've given parenting their very best effort. Adam and Eve had the perfect father and lived in the perfect environment but they chose a way their father didn't want them to go. Sometimes in the Christian church we give the impression that if we follow certain guidelines then our children will turn out exactly as we hope, but we know this isn't true. I mean: are there really steps we can take; programmes we can follow; or biblical models we can adopt that will help us build a strong foundation for our children's lives? Yes, there are. But we can't, and we're fools if we think we can; parent in a certain way; and pray certain prayers, that allow us to say categorically: this is how to bring up godly children. There are parents who have got it more right than most but whose children have turned their back on everything they hold dear, and there are those who have got it more wrong than most whose children serve God faithfully. I'm not sure what category I'll come under – only time will tell!

Much of the Bible shows God, the perfect parent; grieving over his children who have chosen paths he would not have wanted them to take. I can never agree with people when they say: *Well, my sin damages nobody but myself.* Oh yes, it does. It still inflicts pain into the heart of our heavenly Father. That's why Isaiah says of God in 63:9: *In all their distress he too was distressed.* Unlike the shepherd and woman in the previous parables, the father didn't go out to seek the son, however, it was the memory of his father's goodness that brought the son to repentance and forgiveness. When the young man came home, vs20: *He got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him ...* I'd like to believe that the father stood by the window, every day, longing for his son to return. Jesus is giving us a wonderful picture of our Heavenly Father - who never gives up looking out for our returning to Him.

Have you ever stood in front of a window, looking as hard as you can and hoping that you'll catch just a glimpse of a returning runaway? I haven't, but I can remember my mother doing this when I was a kid! Though I didn't think about it at the time, as a parent, I can imagine something of the pain involved.

He is a God who receives us as we are: The son finally comes to his senses in the smelly pigsty, vs17: *How many of my fathers hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!* Have you ever thought that a child of God in a distant country, out of fellowship and wandering aimlessly, can get along worse by this world than the people who are lost? The devil is the prince of this world, and he takes better care of his own than he takes of the Lord's. A lost person will always be happier in this world than a backslidden Christian.

Vs18-19: *I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your hired men.* Why would the son ask to be treated like one of his father's hired men? Is it because he had such a mistaken view of his father? I think it is. He thought that his sin would affect his father's love for him, that it had not only change him but, somehow, it would change the father. But the son didn't understand his father. That's why most sons run away in the first place. That's why most Christians find themselves in the distant country. They don't understand the nature of their Father. Sin doesn't change the way God thinks of us. God has an established faithful and true attitude of love and grace and my sin doesn't cause Him to think any less of me. How many times have we made a mess of our life and been reluctant to come back because we've said to ourselves: I'm not worthy to come back, to pray, to preach, to serve the Lord? I've got news for you, and for me for that matter: we were never worthy in the first place. God never based His relationship with you and me on the fact that we were worthy. It's on the fact that Jesus is worthy. ***He loves us and nothing you or I could ever do would make him love us any more or any less that he already does.*** The son says: *Make me like one of your hired men.* The father says: *No, I'll make you like my son.* That's the kind of Heavenly Father we have.

He is a God who treats us as though we'd never been away: There's no stinging word of rebuke from the father towards his son. He doesn't ask where the son has been, what he's done or what he's been up to, he forgives and then he just gives. He runs out to him and smothers him with hugs and kisses, vs20, and brings him back into the house. Then (and this is the wonderful thing about the Lord, He always gives us more than we expect) the father says, vs22: *Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.*

The son was expecting to be treated like a servant but the father treats him like the son he is. He puts shoes on his feet - the sign of sonship; puts a ring on his finger - the sign of authority; and puts a robe on his shoulders - the sign of fellowship and abundance. And then he tells his servants, vs22: *Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.* Someone must have said to him: Are you sure you don't want to keep this quiet - I mean, aren't you ashamed that your son ran away? He said, 'I'm not ashamed to be his father. I'm not ashamed of my son - let's have a party, bring all your friends, let's have a feast and celebrate.

Our heavenly Father always gives us more than we expect. I realise that we don't often have an image of God throwing a big party. It seems to contradict the seriousness we've always attached to God. But when I think about the ways in which Jesus describes God's Kingdom, a celebratory banquet is often at its centre. As Henri Nouwen points out: *God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because one of his children who was lost has been found.*

Conclusion: Perhaps God is your Father but you're not a son, or daughter, to Him. Perhaps you've never had that experience of salvation when you put your faith and trust in Jesus, and maybe you're reluctant to do so because you feel unworthy. He's a Father. He grieves over you today. He loves you unconditionally; He'll receive you just as you are. You may already be a son or daughter, who's moved away from the Father in the distant country. It doesn't take long to get there - the distant country is just a step away, just a disobedience away. Maybe you've fallen into sin and said to yourself: 'I can never again know the favour of my heavenly father. I am no longer worthy to be called His son.' That's not true. You're just as worthy now as you ever were. He is a Father who is grieving over you today, who loves you unconditionally, He'll receive you just as you are and He'll treat you as though you've never been away.



A Prayer for the Prodigals

Heavenly Father, only you know where our prodigals are - not just the physical place, but in their hearts, their minds and their spirits. None of us can hide from you, and who is lost that you cannot find? We pray for them, Lord. Bring them home - not just to us, but to you. Forgive us if, as parents, friends, or as a church, we have made it easier for them to leave or harder to come back. Wherever they are, and whatever they are doing, touch their lives with your love, peace and compassion. And, when our prodigals return, help us to welcome them back as you would do and teach us all how to celebrate their return. ***Amen.***



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COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

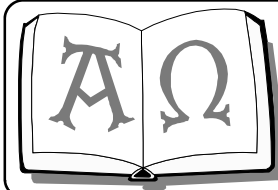
Don't forget to take your Bible to House Group along with any previous/other notes that might be helpful.

Welcome/Icebreaker (10 mins)



Looking Upwards - *Worship* (10 mins)

Songs of Worship; Prayers; Bible Readings; Meditations etc.



Looking Upwards - *Bible Study* (40 mins)

Read through the above Bible reading (and any readings below and the references in the sermon notes) and answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers in your Home Group.

1: When you think of the word 'prodigal' who comes to mind (Luke 15:13)? What is your attitude towards them (1 John 3:16-23)? How can we reach out to them (Matthew 9:10-13)?

2: Prodigals are not only those who have left church or home. How are they made (Acts 15:8-11)? How can those who remain at home still be prodigals? (Matthew 15:7-9)? How can we reach out to them both?

3: In what ways does having 'correct' opinions, but being judgmental, turn prodigals away (Matthew 12:2)? How else might we make it harder for prodigals to return home (Galatians 5:15)? How can we at Emmanuel make prodigals feel welcome (Matthew 23:1-2)?

4: In what ways could you show people, who don't agree with you, that you love them (Matthew 5:44-48)? Are there any prodigals beyond God's reach (Romans 10:13)? What attitudes can you adopt to prepare for the 'smell of the pigsty' (Luke 7:47)?

5: Have you ever been guilty of having the attitude of an older brother to a returning prodigal? If so, what do you think you can do to 'undo' your actions. Have you ever tried to heal the rift that exists between you?

6: What, in your view, is the most important point we can learn from this parable as we seek to live as followers of Jesus in today's world?

7: Pray for those who have prodigals in their lives: for wisdom in difficult situations; for strength and perseverance in prayer. Pray for parents of young children - that they would not do anything which may turn them into prodigals. Ask God for some of His persistent love and compassion for our prodigals.



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards - *Caring for each other* (15 mins)

Is there anything you would like to share with the group:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for help from the group?

*(Reflect with the Lord on your life at the moment and think if there is anything you would like to share and which you feel is appropriate. This is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however - 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!')*



Looking Outwards - *Concern for others* (15 mins)

Is there anything concerning someone in: church; family; friends; or neighbours which you would like to share:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for possible action by the group?

(Please be careful not to pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared).

