

“THE PARABLE OF THE LOVING DAD”

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Text: Luke 15:11-32 NLT

God’s Word: Luke 24:44-48 NLT

So, Jesus was hanging out with the only crowd that ever seemed to want to hang out with Him. Tax Collectors, Sinners—which referred to anyone from a person with a skin disease, to a person with crushed organs to prostitutes, and so forth—anyone on the margins who was deemed an outcast, not good enough...folks that the self-righteous religious leaders of Jesus’ day looked down on, judged and thought weren’t worth a lick.

So, we are told that these religious leaders—these Pharisees and teachers of the law did what they usually did when they found Jesus hanging out with His peeps—they “muttered” and they grumbled, and they judged and they looked down their noses at the whole scene with absolute disgust and said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

And so, because of that, Jesus told THEM this parable. And while the parable has been named by someone down through the centuries: “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” or “The Lost Son”—it’s more about the Father in the Story. It’s more about what God is really like and how God views humanity, the sinners and the self-righteous alike.

In my opinion, it should really be called “The Parable of the Loving Father.” Because it is all about God. And it’s always all about God, anyway, is it not? God is the One Who created us. God is the One Who became One of us. God is the One Who is ONE with us. God is the One Who died to save us. And God is the One Who pursues us, like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and a woman searching for a lost coin—which are the two parables Jesus also tells before the one we are looking at this morning. And God is the One Who finds us. And as we are told in verse 10: “there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

So, how do we get there? How do we get to the place where we repent—where we are found? Do we get ourselves to that place on our own, or is it all God’s doing???

Let’s see...There is no doubt that this parable has three main characters. We’ve got the younger brother. We’ve got the older brother. And we’ve got dad. There ARE the townspeople at the party, but they aren’t named and there is the servant and he only has one line...so, there are three MAIN characters.

There are themes that can be thought of as being independent of one another, but they all have something in common at a deeper level. Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God. His message was about a God whose love far surpasses any and all love expressed by mere humans. And that love of God is celebrated by those who accept it, who give into it.

But it can also give rise to resentment in those who assume that they know all about it and claim to know who is worthy of it, and who is not. To try and get to the radical love shown by the father in this story—who clearly represents God—we need to look at the context in which the story was originally told.

When reading and studying the Bible it is always extremely important to look at the context, to learn as much as we can about the customs of First Century Palestine—in this case. And shame and honor were the dominant culture. And so, let's find out more about this shame-honor culture as it has to do with the Parable of the Loving Father.

Jesus starts the parable with the younger son asking his father for an advance on his inheritance. In Jesus' shame-honor culture, asking a living parent for an early inheritance was not only rude, but it was the equivalent of saying to dear old dad: "I wish you were dead." And Children who did such things would lose their respect and honor, and their community would ostracize them...very much like the religious rulers ostracized anyone they considered to be a "sinner."

The parent's response to such a request would have caused a huge wave of fierce anger. Parents and children would cut all ties to one another over something like this. But, in this case, radically and contrary to what anyone listening would expect of a father dealing with this kind of request from a son—the loving father agrees to divide the property between his two sons. Like I said, those listening to this parable would have been absolutely shocked by the action of the father and the younger son. No one should do such a thing.

It takes the younger son a few days to gather together everything he has inherited and then travel to a foreign country. He definitely wants to cut all family ties.

Back to the father for a moment. The father's love is so strong and so big and so unlike the typical love of other fathers in his culture that it doesn't possess the boy, but is willing to let go. His love is so strong and so big that it makes no demands but is willing to wait patiently. It's a love that forgives and welcomes home.

His love will not rescue us out of or stop us from going to the distant country. Instead it redeems the time spent and the life that we lived in that place. That is good news for those of us who travel to the distant country; and we all go there at some point.

So, the son wastes his money on what we are told is "wild living." And when a famine hits the country, he's in big trouble. And this famine becomes the instrument of the younger son's salvation. What do I mean by that?

Only when he hits rock bottom, does he even consider heading home. God often uses tough circumstances in our lives to bring us to our senses—to bring us to Himself or coax us to Himself...again, He doesn't force our hand, but He is always inviting, always waiting, always looking...God always stands ready to redeem our misery. God is in the business of making Easters out of Good Fridays.

It would be hard to overstate the depths of this young man's humiliation. This is the lowest he can possibly fall in an honor-shame culture and context. Deuteronomy 14:8 says, *"The pig, because it has a split hoof but doesn't chew the cud, is unclean to you: of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcass you shall not touch."* Jewish people were to avoid all dealings with pigs, but this young man is reduced to serving pigs—setting their table—bringing their dinner—being pushed and shoved by them—smelling them—tolerating them—envying them—even coveting their pig-food!

And so, the younger son's "aha" moment has less to do with repentance than it does with self-interest. He is a servant to a pig-farmer and he is hungry. He used to have it all; now he has nothing. Then he compares his situation with that of his father's servants, who have plenty to eat. And it dawns on him that he could improve his lot in life if he could talk his dad into hiring him as a servant. He knows that being reinstated as a son is out of the question.

We should give him some credit, though, for taking this first step. His father is his only hope, and he must be desperately afraid that his father will out-right reject his pleadings. What could he do then?

He would be reduced to making the rounds to unsympathetic neighbors who thought of him as the scum of the earth due to the honor-shame culture and what he had done to shatter it. Would he have to try and get employed by another pig farmer if all this didn't work out?

Imagine his anxiety as he walked the long, dusty road home. We can imagine him practicing his little speech over and over again as he walked. But as fearful as he must have been, he kept putting one foot in front of the other—his hope and desperation being stronger than his fear.

And what has to boy's father been doing the whole time he has been gone? He has been waiting and watching and praying for him to come home! Again, VERY RADICAL for a First Century Palestinian culture—unheard of, really. Jesus says that *“while”* the younger son *“was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son and kissed him.”* Let's stop here for a minute.

The father *“ran”* to his son. This might not sound strange at all in our 21st Century American Context. But in the First Century Palestinian Context honor-shame culture Jesus was living in it was madness!!! It was shameful for a man to run, but the father is too overwhelmed by his love and compassion to worry about his dignity. This is a real Resurrection moment!

The son must look terrible coming down the road—sweating—caked with dirt—dressed in his filthy pigpen clothing. There is no telling when he ate his last meal. As soon as the father gets close enough to hear the son begins to sputter out his recited lines: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...”* But that is as far as he can get.

His father cuts him off before he can ask to be treated like a hired hand. In this culture the father would have been unbelievably generous to even receive the son back at all with only a mild rebuke and a way the son could redeem himself. But this father goes WAY beyond that. He jumps into action to take care of the son's situation.

“Dress this young man in my son's clothing!” “Dress him for a party!” “Get him something to eat!”

This is far better than the son could have even dreamed, and much more than he deserves. It is a moment of full and amazing grace.

The robe, the ring, and the shoes give him dignity. They denote status. They signify that the father is welcoming this young man back as his son. But the father doesn't stop there: *“Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So, they began to celebrate.”*

Back to context. Meat was not part of the daily diet at this time, but was kept for special occasions. And when a special occasion arose, a family would usually slaughter a sheep or a goat, because the smaller animal was a smaller investment or sacrifice than a calf. They would keep the fattened calf for HUGE celebrations, for, perhaps, when the entire village would be coming together.

In slaughtering the fattened calf, the father is involving the entire community—sending them the clear message that he has restored his son to son-ship and therefore to community membership as well. So, everyone is partying. Everyone is celebrating.

Everyone...except...except...the older son. He refuses to enter the party—which would have been a shocking rebuke to his father. And the father, he doesn't rebuke him back, but instead pleads with him to change his mind. And so, the father who extended extravagant grace to the younger son, offers it to the older son as well.

This is really good news for those of us who may relate more to the older son in this story. It can be easier to hate the judger or hate the hater than to hate the lost sinner. It's sometimes easier to forgive a wayward younger brother than a prideful, judgmental older brother—but the father's love is broad enough to include both his disobedient sons.

But will the older son accept the father's love, forgiveness and grace and come into the party which represents the Kingdom of God?

I mean, the real punch of this parable is that the person who continues in his lost-ness is not the one who took his inheritance and ran away—but the one that those listening would have assumed to have never been lost in the first place.

But you know what? It's so easy to categorize ourselves as the younger brother who comes home, but real life is more complicated than that. I think that if we are honest with ourselves and with God we will admit that at different times in our lives we can find ourselves in either role. How easy it is for us to flip from asking forgiveness for ourselves to denying forgiveness for others.

So, there are many lessons from this parable. We are not only loved, but we are meant to love. We are not only forgiven, we are meant to forgive. Jesus told this parable in response to the Pharisees and teachers of the law who judged and complained that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. But they needed to hear that God's love is more than big enough to embrace them as well.

Will they see their need for repentance? Will they realize their sins of judgment, pride and exclusion?

Where are you this morning? Where am I? Leaving home? The Father offers you freedom and you are loved. Are you in the pig pens of life? The Father is waiting patiently and you are loved. Coming home? The Father will protect you and you are loved. Finally home? The Father has prepared a banquet and you are loved and celebrated. Are you standing outside the Kingdom judging the sinners and angry that the Father welcomes them one and all? God is pleading for you to come into the party—for we are all equally sinners and we are all equally loved.

Obviously, this is a parable about who God is and what God's love looks like for every last one of us—no matter who we are and what we have done. He loves us in the brothel and in the pig sty. He loves us as we look down on others and think ourselves better than other sinners. And He always rejoices and throws a party when we turn to Him. This is who God is.

And we are greatly blessed. We have a lot to be thankful for and a great invitation.

God is so good, so loving, so unlike us and the way of the world—no matter the context or culture. There are no conditions to God's unconditional love. It is always there for the asking. And when we embrace it, we get a special grace that tells us we must share it. Not because we have to but because we want to. We want to pass it along. We want to return it with praise and honor to the Author of Love and Life.

That is what it means to be beloved by God. And that is what you and I and everyone else are. Have you embraced it? Will you? Will you come and join the party?

Amen