

3,11,21 The Prodigal

I'm going to begin by reading through the parable of the prodigal in Lk. 15:1-31.

"A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.' So, he divided the estate between them. A few days later, the younger son gathered everything [that he had] and traveled to a distant country, and there he wasted his fortune in reckless and immoral living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to do without and be in need. So, he went and forced himself on one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He would have gladly eaten the pods that the pigs were eating [but they could not satisfy his hunger], and no one was giving anything to him. But when he [finally] came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough food, while I am dying here of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; [just] treat me like one of your hired men."' So, he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion for him and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him; and give him a ring for his hand, and sandals for his feet. And bring the fattened calf and slaughter it and let us [invite everyone and] feast and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and has been found.' So, they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field; and when he returned and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. So, he summoned one of the servants and began asking what this [celebration] meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' But the elder brother became angry and deeply resentful and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he said to his father, 'Look! These many years I have served you, and I have never neglected or disobeyed your command. Yet you have never given me [so much as] a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this [other] son of yours arrived, who has devoured your estate with immoral women, you slaughtered that fattened calf for him!' The father said to him, 'Son, you are

always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live. He was lost and has been found.”

As we look at this, keep in mind that this is more a parable about the father than the prodigal son; and second, God always acts according to His character in any action He takes.

These things will become more apparent in a few minutes.

Let’s begin by establishing what we probably already know and then we’ll look at some nuances and applications.

The father represents God; the prodigal represents one of his sons who turned his back on his father and his family, and the elder brother represents a son who remained in the family, but only out of obligation, not love or gratitude.

Let’s get some historical context first. This is from an online commentary on Luke;

“The father’s forgiveness is remarkable in light of the disrespect the younger son had shown him. It was the height of disrespect in that society for a son to even hint at wanting his inheritance before his father had died. But if that wasn’t enough, this son leaves home. That too was unheard of in a society where the father reigned supreme. In other words, Jesus was describing an extreme example of disrespect. Such a son would have been disowned, not only by the father but by the entire society.”

Another author put it more directly,

“Normally the inheritance did not pass to the heirs until the death of the father. To request it prematurely was tantamount to expressing a wish that the father would die. . . to my knowledge, in all of Middle Eastern literature (aside from this parable) from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health.”

I said earlier that God always acts according to nature. The father has never stopped looking for the son.

Then when he sees him, instead of refusing to see his son, which would have been the way things were done in the 1st century, he runs to greet him before his son has a chance to say anything.

He “fell on his neck and kissed him.” And while his son is still in confession mode, the father is already planning a celebration. Again, this goes against everything that would have been done in that culture.

Dr. Thomas Constable is Dallas Professor I like to look at occasionally; Here's what he wrote on this:

“Since the father saw his son while he was still a great distance from his house, he had apparently been scanning the distant road daily hoping to see him. The father's compassion reflects some knowledge of his son's plight. Perhaps he had kept tabs on him since he left home. The father put feet to his feelings by running out to meet his son, even though it was undignified for an older man to run in Jesus' culture. Embracing and kissing him continually also expressed the father's loving acceptance (cf. Gen. 45:14-15; 33:4; 2 Sam. 14:33; Acts 20:37). This attitude also contrasts with the elder brother's attitude and the Pharisees' attitude. The father initiated the restoration of fellowship before the son could articulate his confession. The word translated “kissed”, may mean either “kissed many times” or “kissed tenderly. . . possibly both. . .” Evidently the father cut his son's confession short because he knew what was in his heart. Rather than simply accepting his son back, much less making him a servant, the father bestowed the symbols of honor, authority, and freedom on him. Then he prepared a banquet for him that probably represents the messianic banquet.”

This is another strong argument for the ‘overcomer’ being the child of God who lives in a state of “coming to his senses”; not the one who is oblivious to his spiritual condition.

The older son is ticked off, because he *does* represent the culture of that century. And legalists hate grace.

But even in *his* case, the father goes out to him, trying to reach him.

The danger of familiarity with parables is that we tend to look at them as stories more than concrete reality.

This really is the Father's approach to any of us who seek His forgiveness. He doesn't just forgive, He celebrates.

He doesn't demand that we somehow ‘make up’ for what we've done, He rejoices over us.

Now, I want to make some applications of this to the day we meet the Lord face to face.

(1 Cor.3:12-15) "If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames."

Johann Bengel writes on the meaning of vs. 15, ". . . only as one escaping through the flames."

"While heaven is entirely a gift of grace, it admits of degrees of felicity, and these are dependent upon how faithfully we have built a structure of character and service upon the foundation of Christ. We can liken the unholy Christian at the judgment seat of Christ to a sailor who just manages to make shore after shipwreck, or to a man who barely escapes with his life from a burning house, while all his possessions are lost. In contrast, the Christian who has allowed his Lord to influence his conduct will have abundant entrance into the heavenly city and be welcomed like a triumphant athlete victorious in the Games. The (spiritual man), unlike the (carnal man), will look back to the privileges conferred on him, of partaking in the divine nature, and will seek to live worthily of it. He will also look forward to the day of assessment and strive to live in the light of it."

The word "suffer" in 1 Cor. 3:15 means detriment or loss. It's a mercantile term for a "bad deal" resulting in loss rather than gain, which results in a penalty or forfeiture.

Because of the righteous judgement of the Lord, the person Paul talks about in 1 Cor. 3 who 'suffers loss' chose a 'bad deal' resulting in forfeiture of his inheritance. Christ's righteousness demands that He withhold from this person what he could have had.

Some other verses with this word can help clarify its usage.

(Acts 27:10) "Men, I sense that this voyage will certainly be a disaster and with great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."

(Phil. 3:7-8) "But whatever former things were gain to me, these things [once regarded as advancements] I have come to consider as loss [absolutely worthless] for the sake of Christ. But more than that, I count everything as loss compared to the privilege and supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have lost everything, and I consider it all garbage, so that I may gain Christ."

We will experience the loss (the forfeiture) of the reward we could have received. Whatever we have done that had no spiritual value, everything that did not have its source in Christ, will not survive the fire of the Bema seat.

So, when the Lord looks at us and tells us what His evaluation is, what will His approach be? Have you ever wondered how *He* will feel or what *His* demeanor toward us will be?

When people think about this, I suppose it ranges from seeing the Lord express anger to disgust to callous indifference. But here's what's really going to happen.

When the Lord looked at Peter after he had denied His Lord, what was in Jesus' eyes? Our view of God will have a huge impact on how we answer that question.

Listen to what the Pulpit Commentary has to say,

"As Jesus was passing from the interrogation before Caiaphas to be examined before the Sanhedrin assembled in solemn council, he heard his servant's well-known voice raised and accompanied with oaths and curses, assuring the bystanders he had no connection with and knew nothing of Jesus of Nazareth. Then, as he passed, the Master turned and looked on his old friend, that disciple who so lately had declared that even if all others deserted the Lord, he never would! The glance of Jesus was full of the tenderest pity; it was not angry, only sorrowful. Matthew and Mark record how, when he heard the cock crow, which Luke tells us happened as our Lord turned to look on the prodigal disciple, he remembered all, and burst into bitter weeping."

One of the main reasons I believe this to be true is the great lengths Jesus went to after His resurrection to restore Peter to fellowship with Him and to a renewed sense of assurance of the Lord's love for him.

Peter needed that – and so will we.

As Joseph Dillow points out in his book "Final Destiny", for those who suffer loss at the judgment seat, however long the duration of the remorse, it's temporary. Here's what he writes,

"We must not forget that when we stand before Him at that Day, we will be in resurrection bodies. Because of the absence of sin and experience of the maximum fullness of human potential, our ability to deal with the emotion of grief will be heightened and immeasurable more mature. There is a cycle to grief, it's not permanent."

And Samuel Hoyt sums it up this way:

"To overdo the sorrow aspect of the Bema Seat of Christ is to make heaven into hell. To underdo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential."

We should absolutely take our lives here seriously, for we must all give an account for how we lived, but we should also take seriously the reality that the Person who will evaluate us is the Person who died for us.

I'm going to read an expanded quote from a transcribed message by Sparks that I read recently:

"Although this whole vast universe has behind it a mind, a design, and a plan, yet back of all that there is a heart, and that means love. We sought first to see that the very creation of man was dedicated by the heart of God for purposes of His own love, and then that the whole Bible is a progressive and growing unveiling of that fact. It is God's love for man that lies behind all His dealings with man. We traced that fact from Adam, through the chosen seed, particularly citing the case of Abraham, and then of the chosen nation, Israel. How full, wonderful, altogether inexplicable, was the love of God! We went on into the New Testament and pointed out how that eternal, mighty, mysterious love of God became fully embodied in the person of His Son, Who lived His life, did His work, gave Himself, all on the basis of love for the Father and that the Father might have in man that upon which His heart has ever been set. We dwelt at some length upon His love for God His Father, and we marked it also in connection with His disciples, whom, having loved, He loved unto the end; and we saw at what infinite cost to Himself all was at length accomplished, all in the strength of that love.

Passing from the days of His flesh over into the next part of the Bible, beginning with the book of the Acts and running on to the book of the Revelation, we have the love of God from eternity as now seen to be centered, in the first instance, in something called "the Church": "the church of God which he purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). "Christ... loved the church and gave himself up for it" (Eph. 5:25).

This unveiling is brought to us, not exclusively but in its fullest and richest form, in the ministry of the Apostle Paul, who himself was a wonderful embodiment of God's love. It was the one note deepest in his own heart, breaking out from time to time in nothing short of utter amazement. He "loved me and gave himself up for me"! (Gal.2:20). "O the depth of the riches..." (Rom. 11:33); they are the riches not only of wisdom and knowledge but also of His love. And this man, who could never understand why that eternal love should light upon him and single him out, has given us such a marvelously full, deep, rich revelation of that love. We are just helpless and hopeless when we try to cope with this revelation through and in Paul. We can only do the best the Lord enables us to do in thinking about it and bringing it to the notice of others."

Even if we are prodigals in some way, how does God express His disappointment in having to hold back while we remain at a distance? We saw in the parable in Lk. 15 that the father was constantly surveying the landscape, looking for and hoping his son would return.

Jesus was the embodiment of the Father's nature – He said that if we've seen Him, we've seen the Father, and we've already seen the way the Jesus responded to Peter after his denials of the Lord.

He loved him, he went after him and he restored him.

It's kind of ironic because the most loving thing a person can do is to tell someone the truth. But if they don't want to hear it, they always attack the character of the one that offended them.

The Corinthians were mad at Paul because he told them truths they didn't want to hear.

Some comments by this author describes Paul's response to those who had rejected him and accused him of being judgmental and unloving.

“If ever a people deserved the opposite of love from a man, those Corinthians deserved it from Paul. They owed everything to him, and they treated him, to say the least of it, most shabbily, so that he could say that the more he loved them, the less they loved him (2 Cor. 12:15). When you read about them your uppermost feeling is that it requires a great deal to love these people. Yet what is Paul's attitude? His heart is going out in brokenness over them.”

There's no evidence that the Corinthians responded to Paul's exhortation. Hopefully some did.

Either way, God will always honor the decisions we make, whatever those decisions are.

(Gal. 6:7) “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”

So, what happens to the prodigal who *doesn't* return, who dies with the pigs away from his home and father?

Fortunately, in the parable that didn't happen. But in Corinth it did. 1 Cor. 11:29-30 shows us 'worst case scenario'.

“For anyone who eats and drinks [without solemn reverence and heartfelt gratitude for the sacrifice of Christ], eats and drinks a judgment on himself if he does not recognize the body [of Christ]. That [careless and unworthy participation] is the reason why many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep [in death].”

God may respond to our rebellion by taking us out of this world prematurely. But the next verse in 1 Cor. 11:32, tell us what is happening behind the scenes:

“When we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord . . .”

The word 'chastened' means, “to train up a child, to educate or discipline.”

The discipline may be severe, but it's still based on a father's love for his child and is seeking to accomplish what is needed to protect and train him.

We need to remember how the writer to the Hebrews expands on this:

(Heb. 12:5-10) “(Do not forget) the divine word of encouragement which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not make light of the discipline of the Lord, and do not lose heart and give up when you are corrected by Him; for

the Lord disciplines and corrects those whom He loves, and He chastises every son whom He receives.' You must submit to [correction for the purpose of] discipline; God is dealing with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? Now if you are exempt from correction and without discipline, in which all [of God's children] share, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Moreover, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we submitted and respected them [for training us]; shall we not much more willingly submit to the Father of spirits, and live [by learning from His discipline]? For our earthly fathers disciplined us for only a short time as seemed best to them; but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness."

What we need to keep in mind always is that our eternal relationship with God will be a love relationship no matter what happens here.

But the honors associated with that relationship in the next life will be determined by the depth of that relationship we enter in this life.

God will take us as far into the knowledge of His Son as we are willing to go, because His desire for us is that *all* of us reach the fullest revelation, experience and expression of Christ possible.

(Lk. 12:32) "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure (His heart's desire) to give you the Kingdom."

In the Expositor's Bible Commentary, the parable of the prodigal son was described as "the crown and flower of all the parables. This story is *only* found in Luke's Gospel."

There is an amazing commentary on the parable of the prodigal son given Alexander MacLaren:

"The prodigal's heart would be likely to sink as he came nearer the father's tent. It had seemed easy to go back when he acted the scene in imagination, but every step homewards made the reality more difficult.

No doubt he hesitated when the old home came in sight, and perhaps his resolution would have oozed out at his fingers if he had to march up alone in his rags, and run the gauntlet of servants before he came to speech with his father. So, his father's seeing him far off and running to meet him is exquisitely in keeping, as well as movingly setting forth, how God's love goes out to meet

His returning prodigals. That divine insight which discerns the first motions towards return, that divine pity which we dare venture to associate with His infinite love, that eager meeting the shamefaced and slow-stepping boy half-way, and that kiss of welcome before one word of penitence or request had been spoken, are all revelations of the heart of God, and its outgoings to every wanderer who sets his face to return.

Beautifully does the father's welcome make the son's completion of his rehearsed speech impossible. It does not prevent his expression of penitence, for the more God's love is poured over us, the more we feel our sin. But he had already been treated as a son and could not ask to be taken as a servant. Beautifully, too, the father gives no verbal answer to the lad's confession, for his kiss had answered it already; but he issues instructions to the servants which show that the pair have now reached the home and entered it together.

The gifts to the prodigal are significant. They not only express the welcome, but seem to be capable of specific interpretations, as representing various aspects of the blessed results of return to God. The robe is the familiar emblem of character. The prodigal son is treated like the high priest in Zechariah's vision; his rags are stripped off, and he is clothed anew in a dress of honor. The ring is a token of wealth, position, and honor. It is also a sign of delegated authority and is an ornament to the hand. So, God gives His prodigals, when they come back, an elevation which unforgiven beings do not reach, and sets them to represent Him, and arrays them in strange beauty. No doubt the lad had come back footsore and bleeding, and the shoes may simply serve to keep up the naturalness of the story. But probably they suggest equipment for the journey of life. That is one of the gifts that accompany forgiveness.

Last of all comes the feast. Heaven keeps holiday when some poor waif comes shrinking back to the Father. The prodigal had been content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf, but he could not get bread on such terms. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father's love before he could be fed. The feast is for those who come back penitently, and are received forgivingly, and endowed richly by the Father in heaven."

This last phrase reminded me of the passage we've looked at in Rev. 3:20-21. Again, in the Amplified Translation:

“Behold, I stand at the door and continually knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him (and restore him). He who overcomes I will grant to him [the privilege] to sit beside Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down beside My Father on His throne.”

A feast and a throne are offered to the Laodicean prodigal who ‘comes to his senses’ and opens the door – just as these things we’re give to the son of the father in Lk. 15.

I’m going to close our study with a short comment by Sparks on what we’ve been looking at tonight. He was commenting on a passage in Eph. 2:3-5:

“We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, indulging the desires of human nature. We were, by nature, children of wrath, just like the rest [of mankind]. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were [spiritually] dead and separated from Him because of our sins, He made us [spiritually] alive together with Christ (for by His grace you have been saved).

Here’s what he wrote,

“If you forget all that has been said, do get the impression upon your heart of this one thing ‘His great love wherewith he loved us.’ This whole matter of a Christian's life is gathered into that. That love in us is the satisfying answer to the heart of God. It is not how much truth and doctrine we possess, how much teaching we have or give; it is not a matter of the mysteries of the Gospel; it all resolves itself into this - the love of God shown to us and then shown by us.”