

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the lost son is probably one of the most powerful pictures of the forgiving love of God. Through that story, Jesus presents a vivid illustration of God and His mercy for repentant sinners. The passage goes from Luke 15:11 to v. 32. Since it is rather long to read, I will just describe it.

The younger son

The story begins by introducing to us a father and his two sons. The younger son comes to the father and says, 'Father, give me my share of estate'. Fathers sometimes chose to divide up their inheritance early and retire from managing their estates. But it is quite unusual for a son to ask for his share of the inheritance while the father is still alive and in good health. This showed arrogant disregard for his father's authority as head of the family. The story tells us that the father consented to his son's request.

Within just a few days, the younger son converted all his inheritance into cash, left his family and went into a far country. Obviously this was his plan when he asked for his inheritance in the first place. He wanted to be his own boss and have his independence. Money was his ticket out from the rules of his family, so he took it and ran.

But alas, things that come easily tend to go easily as well. In this distant land, he squandered his money on 'wild living.' We can imagine him spending his days in immoral living, using his money on whatever he chose. The inheritance sustained him for a while but then, it dried up. He was left with nothing and no one. And to make matters worse, a famine came. Food became scarce and expensive. In dire need, he desperately looked for employment. All that he could find was the lowly job of feeding pigs. No Jew would touch a pig because it was an unclean animal according to Jewish law (Leviticus 11:2-8; Deuteronomy 14:8). Therefore feeding pigs for a Jewish person was about as low as one could go. And what is more, we are told that he was so hungry that he longed to eat even the pods he gave to the pigs. For this young man to desire to eat food that the pigs had touched was to be degraded beyond belief.

While he was in this condition, he began to think about home. Hardship sometimes has a powerful way of bringing people to face facts. At home, his father was giving him everything. But in v. 16, it says that *no one was giving anything to him*. Away from home, he was nobody and nobody cared about him. It was a terrible come-down from what he had been used to.

So he found himself in this state and reality finally hit him. We read in v. 17 that *he came to himself*. He came to his senses. Sitting among pigs that were better fed than he was, he finally woke up. He realized that at home, his father's hired servants have more food than they can handle. And there he was starving! He then came to the logical conclusion that he should have arrived at. And it is this, v. 18. 'I will arise and go back to my father. That's the only place left for me to go'.

This was not necessarily an easy decision. His attempt to live carelessly and independent of any constraints was a failure. If he returned, he would be the object of ridicule from the servants and the hired men. His older brother would not take it at all kindly if he came home to an inheritance in which he no longer had a share. And he knew that he had no right to return to his father either. He could have saved his pride by never going back. But instead, he chose to go home.

The key lies in the words he planned to say to his father. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you'. This is a deep confession. Notice. It is not just against the father. It is also against heaven, against God. Then he thought of a request. 'I'm not asking you to take me as your son. I have no more right to be your son. But give me a chance to be among your servants. I don't know if I deserve even to be taken back as a servant. But if you consider that it is acceptable, please, could you take me back?'

The father

So the son returned home, not knowing what to expect, but in hopes of being hired as a servant. We read in v. 20 that *while he was still a long way off, his father saw him*. The fact that the father saw the son when he was still far away suggests that he had hoped and watched for such a return. This father, who had most cause for bitterness and anger, ran towards his runaway son. And when they met, he embraced and kissed him, showing clearly that he still considered him his son. This pictures a relationship being restored.

Despite the warm welcome, the son does not conclude that his prepared confession has now become irrelevant. He still offered his confession in exactly the same terms he used in vv. 18-19. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son'. The only part missing was the request to be made a slave. Perhaps the son could not bring himself to utter the words about being like a hired servant. Or perhaps the father was so intent on his welcome that he did not give him time to finish. This is not clear. But at any rate, the son was able to get out the most important words, those that expressed his sense of sin and unworthiness.

Then the servants are told to clothe the son with the finest robe and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. So much for the son's intended request that he be treated as a servant! That would have been a sufficient kindness. The father does not stop there though. 'Bring the fattened calf', he said, 'and kill it. We are going to have a feast in honor of my son's return'. He gives the reason for the celebration. The son had been as good as dead to him, but now had returned to life. He had been lost, but now was found. That is why this is called the parable of the lost son. As the shepherd celebrated upon finding the lost sheep, and the woman upon finding her lost coin, so this father celebrated at finding his lost son.

The older son

But the story does not end there. It has a final scene involving the older brother. When the older brother learned from one of the servants what had happened, he became extremely angry, refusing even to enter into the house. Unlike the father, this older son had no compassion at all. He did not care that his younger brother, having gone through very bad times, had learned his lesson. He simply could not understand why his father should celebrate the return of an irresponsible person. The extent of his anger was made clear when his father came out to plead with him. He spoke of how he

had 'slaved' for him for years without getting any special favors. 'And this son of yours', he said, 'who has wasted your property is welcomed back with the fattened calf'! His bitterness is shown by his description of his own relationship to his father as 'slavery', by his disowning of his brother in the phrase 'this son of yours', and by his probably unfounded accusation that his brother squandered his inheritance on prostitutes.

With these words, the older son showed himself entirely out of sympathy with his father. He grieved the father just as much as the prodigal son had done by his wild living. Perhaps it is better to speak of the parable of two lost sons since the older brother separated himself just as far from the father as the younger one had done.

The father's reply was as gentle as the son's complaint was harsh. He affirmed the faithfulness of the older brother and reminded him that all he owns belongs to him too. He also insisted on the appropriateness of rejoicing, repeating the words he had spoken to the servants – the younger son had been dead and was now alive; he had been lost and was found.

Far away

Let us consider now the spiritual meaning of the story. This parable has three points of contact: the prodigal son, the father and the older son, each character representing one main theme.

The prodigal son symbolizes the sinner. The clue to the first theme is the repetition of the joyful words about the one who was dead being alive and the one who was lost being found. These words picture Jesus' ministry: the bringing back of people from selfish rebellion and death, through repentance, into the love and mercy of God and the joy of the kingdom.

More specifically, the story gives us a picture of the lost before they are found. Jesus portrays the position of the sinners as one of outrageous, selfish rebellion against a loving father. He speaks of them as being in a 'far country', 'lost' and 'dead'. That is Jesus' diagnosis of the human condition in general.

The apostle Paul describes the sinner in a similar way. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, he speaks of his readers as having been 'dead' in trespasses and sin, 'gratifying the cravings' of their sinful natures and being 'object of wrath'. He goes on to say in Ephesians 2:13, *But now in Christ Jesus **you who once were far away** have been brought near through the blood of Christ.* When Paul talked about his readers as being 'once far away', he was specifically referring to the fact that they were Gentiles. The thought is not far removed from that of Jesus' parable of the son in the 'far country'. The sinner is like this son who traveled to a distant country. He is someone who wandered far away from the Father's house, from God.

The confession

This is a deadly situation for the sinner and there is only one thing that can undo it: repentance. The picture of the son coming to his senses, abandoning the far country and returning to his father to seek his mercy illustrates the repentance that Jesus calls for. Here it is important to see what genuine repentance looks like.

The decision to go home was initially motivated by a desire to improve his own situation of desperate need. He said to himself in v. 17, *How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!* He suddenly realized that it is better to cast himself on his father's mercy than to remain in a distant land, living a life lower than the unclean animals and suffering great hunger. His sincerity is seen by the confession he planned to make. In that confession, he expressed sorrow not for what he had lost or what had happened to him, but for what he had done:

he had sinned. He recognized that his sin was first against God. *I have sinned against heaven*. Sin is always sin against God before anyone else. But he had also sinned against his father and he saw this. 'Father, I have sinned before you.'

Then he decided that in what he will tell his father, he will place himself at his discretion, asserting no rights. He recognized that he has forfeited all claim to be received as a son. He just wanted to have the possibility of being hired as a day laborer (*misthios*), the lowest of three classes of laborers. A slave (*doulos*) was like part of the family, although part of the lower class. A day laborer was less cared for because he was hired on special occasions for one day at a time. By this desire, the son showed that he wanted to be a minimal burden. He accepted the consequences of his choices and was willing to be the lowest of the low. There are no excuses, only a confession and a humble request. This is what true confession is about: no claims, not even to his sonship, just reliance on God's mercy and provision.

'I am not worthy to be called your son'

What do you think would have happened if this son, while sitting there among the pigs, thought to himself, 'Well, I am still his son, am I not? I am going to go back home and ask my father to take me back as a member of the family. He can't deny that he is my father and that I am his son'. And so, he goes back and tells his father, 'Hi dad, you know me. I'm your son! I know, I'm barefooted and dressed in rags. I did some nasty things and I had to pay for it. But that's the past. Now you got to take me back into the family. I'm your son, remember'. Would that restore the father-son relationship? Does the fact that he is the son give him the right to be automatically reinstated into the family? I don't think so. Something would be missing in his confession.

The important point about this son is not just that he returns. It is also how he returns. *I am no longer worthy to be called your son*. The son could not be fully reinstated until he saw and admitted that he had no right to be a son. Although the younger son represents the sinner, the attitude of confession applies just as much to the believer.

You see, it is a dangerous thing to base the assurance of your salvation on a claim to sonship. I would be a fool if I come before the Lord on that day and say, 'God, I am a Christian. I was baptized 25 years ago. Remember? I have always said that you are my Father. You have to let me in because I am your son'. If I claim my salvation in that fashion, the Lord might simply say, 'I don't know who you are'.

In this respect, I find that certain translations of John 1:12 are somewhat misleading. In the NASV for example, we read, *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God*. If we become children of God, it is not by a right that we can claim. We become His sons by grace. That's why I prefer the way the RSV renders it. *But to all who received him, who believed in his name, He gave power to become children of God*. God gave to those who believe in Christ the power to make them His children.

This son, the Lord Jesus tells us, came back to the father, pleading only for a place among the servants. That is the attitude God desires to see in us. He is looking for people who will say to Him, 'Lord, I tried to do my best by your grace. I make no claim. Though I am your son, I don't ask you to treat me as your son. Just receive me among your servants. That will be enough for me'.

The compassion of God

That is the meaning of grace. Grace implies that I can make no claim. My confidence rests solely on the compassion of God. A compassionate Father, that is the second point of contact. V. 20: *But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion...*

This word ‘compassion’ in Greek comes from the word *spilagchnon* which, in Classical Greek, is used to speak of the upper viscera of animals, as the heart, lungs and liver. In the NT, it refers to the intestines, to the bowels. By metaphor, it came to mean the deep-seated feeling within you. To have compassion is to feel with your inward being. So it is not just any kind of feeling. And that is the word used here in the parable. The father had compassion, i.e., he had a deep feeling, a deep inner sense of sympathy for his lost but repentant son.

Interestingly, this word is used in the NT only with reference to Jesus. It is never used with reference to anyone else. Let’s look briefly at those five times to get a better understanding of its meaning.

The first time, it was used in Matthew 9:36. It says that when the Lord Jesus looked upon the crowd of people, he had compassion upon them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

The second time, it was used with respect to the feeding of the multitude in Matthew 14:14 and 15:32. When Jesus saw their hunger and their need, He had compassion on them. That is why He fed the five thousand people.

The third time, a leper was involved. Ugly, poor, full of wounds, a leper was the kind of person nobody wanted to have around. Jesus looked at the leper and was moved with compassion. That is in Mark 1:41.

The fourth time Jesus had compassion was on the two blind men in Matthew 20:34. They first asked for mercy, then for the restoration of their sight. Moved with compassion, Jesus healed them.

And the fifth time, a widow was following the body of her dead son to the burial ground, weeping over the loss of her only son. When Jesus saw her, He had compassion. You know the rest of the story. Jesus revived the son. Luke 7:13.

On these five occasions, Jesus saw the need or the suffering, and He had compassion. And like the father in the parable, God’s compassion reaches out to sinners who, repenting of their sin, run to Him for forgiveness. They can be assured of a warm welcome.

The protest

We cannot conclude this study without a word about the older son. Who does he represent? Jesus used the older brother to portray the self-righteous leadership.

The older son is unmoved by the return of his brother. In fact, he is angry. He has been a model son. He has done everything his father ever asked of him. He has ‘slaved’ for his father’s benefit. But he has never had the recognition now given to the prodigal son. After wasting his money in another country, how can it be that the younger one gets a celebration? The older son has never even been given a little party with his friends! ‘Could it be that immorality holds more merit with my father than my faithfulness’, he thought. ‘Where is justice?’

We tend to identify ourselves with the prodigal son and rejoice in the welcoming love of God. But we can also see ourselves in the older brother. It is a common human failing to think that we are not appreciated as we ought to be, to feel that people do not give us credit for what we have done. Also, we are usually somewhat critical of those we see as having failed to live up to our standards, even if our standards are not theirs.

While the resentment of this elder brother is easy to understand, his protest reveals the same sort of self-righteousness shown by the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. The Pharisees and the scribes

also claimed to be righteous and in tune with God but their rejection of Jesus and His ministry to sinners (cf. Luke 15:1-2) showed how far they were from the God they said they were serving. Jesus' parable is a warning to such people and by implication a challenge to all those who claim to serve God.