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## Parable of the Prodigal Son

Let's start out with a hearty "happy new year!" I hope everyone had a great Christmas season and is starting off 2020 well.

We spent some of our Bible study time late in 2019 focused on the coming of Jesus and then his birth. Today, I want to start a series that reflects on some of Jesus' teachings, particularly some of the important lessons Jesus taught by using parables.

First, what exactly is a parable? Simply put, dictionary.com defines the word as "a short story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle or moral lesson."

Remember when and where Jesus was teaching. He preached and taught primarily in an area known as The Galilee in Israel somewhere between 27 to 33 AD. Many of the people listening to him were uneducated, so Jesus needed a way to connect with them, to help them understand what could be difficult concepts. He was bringing the lesson to their level. I don't mean to make it sound like they were stupid. I don't mean that at all. Literacy just wasn't as valued in those days. And Jesus was teaching a heightened kind of faith, at least in some ways, from the Jewish scriptures — what we call the "Old Testament" today. He was teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, life after death and caring for the marginalized in his era.

Those aren't easy subjects even today.

I mean, there's a reason we have scaled-down versions of sermons during a time for children in many of our worship services today. It's the same concept: Make something less complex to assist with understanding.

Let's get started with some of these parables with one you likely have heard — or at least know a little something about: The Prodigal Son.

This story is found in the New Testament in the book of Luke. It's found in chapter 15, verses 11 to 32. I'll be reading from the Common English Bible because I like its more contemporary language. If you want to follow along, Luke is about two-thirds of the way back from the front of most Bibles. Or you can read from the You Version or BibleGateway apps — both are free downloads from the Apple apps store or from Google Play.

Here we go ...

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. <sup>13</sup> Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together

and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

<sup>14</sup> “When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.” ’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! <sup>23</sup> Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. <sup>29</sup> He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup> Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”

It sounds, at first, like a fairly simple story to understand.

- A young man wants his inheritance so he can enjoy it now.
- He goes off and wastes it in sinful living.
- He hits bottom and realizes his father's servants are living a better life than him, so much so that even the swill the pigs are eating is starting to look pretty good to him.
- He decides he will go back home and grovel, so he at least has a roof over his head and food to eat.
- But he doesn't get the half-hearted welcome he anticipates. Instead, his father sees him at a distance and runs to meet him.
- The father is so happy to see this son that he thought might be dead that he orders the fattened calf to be slaughtered for a special meal.

It's pretty heart-warming. But there are lots of complexities that can add to our understanding of this seemingly simple tale.

Let's go through a few points.

- First, asking for his inheritance while the father is still alive is an incredible insult to his parent. In Jewish culture at the time, the son was basically saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead." It would have been shocking to the audience. Such a thing simply was not done, so it would have been an attention-grabber.
- Next, the son goes off and wastes it in sinful living. I don't know whether he went to the ancient world's version of Las Vegas, but it sure sounds like that might be the case here. Either way, the son apparently has a heck of a fun time until — as we all know happens — the money runs out. Apparently, the son isn't the best of money managers because he runs out of money at such a pace that he ends up taking a job tending hogs.
- Jewish people then — and many now — see pigs as the dirtiest of animals. It is specifically listed among the animals God tells the people they are not to eat in Leviticus 11:7, and Deuteronomy 14:8 takes it a step further and says Jews who want to remain "clean," meaning pure in God's eyes, shouldn't even touch them. The younger son in our story not only is near them, he's tending them — a serious no-no in Jewish society. In Jewish culture, pigs are seen as destructive, as carriers of disease. And, let's face it, they smell.
- Back to our story. That episode with the pigs probably helps the young son realize that he's hit rock bottom, so he decides to go home and live as a servant. He even rehearses what he's going to say to his father when he gets home. Clearly, the younger son is expecting his dad to be angry, upset and, probably above all, ashamed of his actions.
- Instead, as he gets near home, his father sees him at a distance and runs to meet him. From what I've read, this shows just how happy the father is that his younger son has come home. A dignified adult man simply would not run toward anybody for any reason beyond a scenario such as this, when the joy is just so overpowering that you have to run.
- The father launches a grand party in the younger son's honor! Killing the fattened calf for a feast was reserved for only the biggest of celebrations. They didn't eat meat as often as we do now. They didn't have the slaughterhouses or distribution systems that

we do now, so meat was a luxury in many cases, particularly beef. Clearly, this father was extremely happy to see his son come home.

Some people finish with that thought, the happy homecoming. But I think we need to take the whole story into account. The older son, the one who never left, the one who stayed and worked with and for the father, is jealous and upset. He points out that he never got so much as a goat for a dinner with his buddies.

He doesn't see why it's fair for the younger son who made so many mistakes to be celebrated so highly.

The father explains that he's just happy — pleased that a son who he thought was dead is alive, and back with the family.

Then, the story just ends.

So, what does it mean?

Well, I think it's important to understand what else Jesus is teaching both before and after this piece of scripture. Just prior to this, Jesus is criticized by the religious leaders of the day for eating with sinners and of working on the Sabbath — though that "work" was healing people. That seems like a worthwhile way to spend a Sabbath day of rest to me.

So Jesus shares a series of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, particularly about how he pursues the lost in society to invite them into an eternity of relationship with Christ. One of those parables is this one about the Prodigal Son.

So, like I asked, what does it mean?

Here's my take.

I think this is a great story that is meant to help people realize that no matter how badly they may have squandered life's opportunities, no matter how mean they have been to people and no matter how sinful they once were, they can make their way back to God by confessing their sins — really, it's about owning up to what we've done — and all people can be part of the Kingdom of heaven, which is often referred to in Christian circles as "going home."

In this story, the younger son heads off and squanders opportunities — not just the gifts and rewards his father gave him but the chance to be part of a family who would love, care for and nurture him.

When he hits rock bottom, he realizes he has strayed far from what he had hoped his life would become. He is ready to confess his errors in life to his father — much like we are expected to do before God, the Father in the Trinity, which is a concept we'll discuss in a future episode.

There is some question here about whether the son truly repents. That word, repent, is important in both Judaism and Christianity. It means "to express sincere regret." This isn't like when the teacher in elementary school orders you to tell another kid you're sorry and you do so begrudgingly.

No, this means you truly are sorry and want to change your ways.

The younger son in this story recognizes his poor circumstances, but our story doesn't say he is really sorry for having done wrong; he may just be sorry that his life is so poor at that moment. I'll confess I don't dwell on that part of the story much. Jesus has just talked about the importance of repentance in other parables, so I tend to think the author of this part of Jesus' story just didn't provide that detail. I think it's implied that the younger son repented because

he's truly at his lowest point, so much so that he's willing to go back to his family and to live as a servant.

Talk about a heaping helping of humble pie!

These characters all represent something in the story of humanity.

First, the younger son represents all of us who have sinned and made numerous errors. We've not lived up to expectations. We've squandered opportunities. We've not lived in community with others in favor of living out our selfish desires.

But just like the father forgives the younger son and welcomes him back home with open arms, God also forgives us and welcomes us "home," with open arms once we recognize what we've done and come to him seeking to restore and build upon our relationship with our loving Creator.

So, what about that older son? I'm sad to say that many Christians fit the role of that older son. They're not bad people. Indeed, they are the ones who have done the work all along. They've done what God, the Father, has asked of them. They have served well, and probably without the accolades they deserve.

In the story, the father makes a point to say that the older son has been and always will be with him — a bond the father values highly with his older offspring. In some ways, longtime Christians sometimes feel this way about people who come to belief later in life or after making a monumental error — people who commit a serious crime and land in prison or people who come to faith after a lifetime of disbelief and/or debauchery. I'm not saying that feeling from Christians is right. In fact, Jesus is making the point that such a thought is just-plain wrong. But Jesus was making a point: Religious types like me, people of faith, shouldn't be jealous when God — or anyone else, for that matter — dotes over someone who has come to faith later in life or after hitting rock bottom.

Think about it. What did the older son lose by his younger brother coming home? Absolutely nothing. What was his the day before is still his after the younger brother returns. The older son still has the father's love and affection. He still has what appears to be an important relationship with his father.

The same can be said of us, shall we say, seasoned Christians.

But for the younger son, this return is monumental! He has confessed his sins. He is aiming to make a major correction in his life. He is coming "home" to a father who has longed for this moment. He is restored in his relationship to his father.

And that's the way it works for someone who comes to faith in God, no matter how late in life, no matter how far gone that person once had been.

God is waiting for you, looking off into the distance, watching for another Prodigal Son or Daughter to come over the horizon.

How can we put the lessons of this story into action?

If you see yourself in the older brother, please trade bitterness and jealousy for the celebratory attitude of the father in the story. Let's celebrate when someone discovers faith in our living and loving God.

If you see yourself in the younger son, please know it's not too late. God loves you and wants you to join God's family. Jesus loves you so much that He gave His life for you. There is a metaphorical fattened calf ready for a feast in your honor.

A loving Father and a joy-filled family of fellow Christians await your arrival.

If you're willing, would you allow me to pray for you now.

Gracious and loving God, some of us have never known a father who loves us so much that he is willing to watch for us and eagerly awaits us to appear in the distance. We just know the bad things we've done. We feel ashamed, unworthy.

But through the story of the Prodigal Son, we now know you keep a place for us in your kingdom. You hold a place for us to be part of your family.

So Lord, on this day I confess my sins, whatever they may have been that kept me away from you. I ask that you enter into my life, that you give me wisdom and strength to come toward you.

And please help me to see myself not as the younger son in the pig pen but instead the celebrated returning family member at a feast held in my honor.

I ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

This has been the first in a series of reflections on some of Jesus' parables. Next time, we'll look at another well-known parable: The Good Samaritan.

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