

FORGIVING FATHER
Luke 15:1-2, 11-31

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A Certain Man (Luke 15:11)

While this parable is most often presented as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” it is probably best entitled “The Thankful Father.” Only one character, the father, plays a part in all the conversations of the story. He dialogues first with the younger son and then the older. The real meaning of parables often is found among the conversations of the characters. The father is the only one who converses with each major character. Despite the complexity of the parable, it is told in an economy of words, and there are never more than two players on the stage of the story at any given time.

I would, therefore, suggest that the central character of the text is the first one mentioned “a certain man.” The parable concerns not only the “certain man,” but also how he relates to his “two sons.” Ironically, in both of the major conversations, the father is reacting to the return of a son. The younger son returns from a far country, while the elder son returns from the field. We, therefore, we must not miss the “certain man,” for he represents God himself.

The Younger Son (Luke 15:12)

It is hard to make too much of the actions of this runaway boy. By demanding that he receive his portion of the inheritance (one-third, as the older son would get two-thirds), he is treating his father as if his father has already died. Having no concern about the security of his father in his senior years, the son wants what will come to him one day, but he wants it now! New Testament scholar David Garland has equated the son’s action as saying, “I wish you were already dead. But since you aren’t, I can’t wait any longer.”

Ancient Jewish writings warn fathers about giving an inheritance to their sons too early. These texts indicate that early distribution of an estate was a rare occasion (but not unheard of). Fathers, therefore, were clearly warned against regrettable, rash decisions to distribute their wealth before their death. With one bold request, the Jewish lad, probably about 17 years of age, declared that he was denying both his relationship with his father and his family—show me my money!

At a conference for pastors that I attended, one of the ministers shared a story about his son during prayer requests time. On a Sunday night following church, the son handed his pastor/father a three-page, single-spaced letter. It could best be summarized this way: “Dear Mom and Dad, you are great parents, but I must be honest with you. I don’t buy this Christianity thing anymore. I will come to church when I am home from college so you can save face, but when I am away at school, I am finished with the gospel.” The father appealed to his son, crying, “I’ve failed you as a pastor if you feel this way.” The son replied, “Oh, no, Dad, you didn’t fail me. It’s not about that!”

During this time of prayer requests, another pastor opened up, as well, saying he had a daughter who had done the same. When the prayer time was over, I watched these two ministers, who each had a “wandering” child, embrace each other because they each understood the other’s pain—a pain that comes when a child leaves the father’s fold.

The pastor of the son said to his wayward boy, “If you want to go on a journey reading philosophers, I’ll go with you on that journey. But I’ll not get stuck with you. Some folks get stuck on a journey and never come home again.”

As each of these ministers shared their story, I couldn’t help but think that God knew their pain, too, because God is a “certain man” who has two sons, and one of them runs away to a foreign land. And even the other son doesn’t come close as he closes his heart to the grace of his father.

A Distant Country (Luke 15:13)

The son “gathered everything together.” This language of “gathering together” may be code language for converting one’s assets into cash. Fleeing on a journey, the younger son hopes to get away from both his father and his father’s household. With the fewest of words, Luke indicates that it was not long until the boy had blown his bundle—squandered his estate with loose living. Interestingly enough, the older son fills in more detail concerning his younger brother’s indiscretions. Put plainly, he says, “...he devoured your wealth with prostitutes” (15:30).

Anticipating such foolish actions by young men, the Wisdom Literature of ancient Israel warned against fleshly flings that would divest one of his assets. Sir 9:6 says, “Do not give yourself to prostitutes, or you may lose your inheritance” (compare Proverbs 5:1-14; 23:26-35; 29:3). Advocating a similar warning, the proverbial sage says, “Whoever loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and olive oil will never be rich” (Proverbs 21:17). The younger son, therefore, fits the paradigm of the undisciplined son of Proverbs and other Jewish literature, while the older son should expect to reap all the rewards of obedience.

The Pig Pen (Luke 15:14-15)

The son ran to be far away from the watchful eye of the father. Thus, he fled to be free in a foreign land. As is always the case, the sin sank in and began to demand its destructive toll. While wallowing in the pig pen, the son realizes that he has exchanged the freedom found in obeying his father with slavery to his sinful nature. He is bankrupt, both financially and spiritually.

A severe famine drives the runaway boy to rock bottom as a Jewish lad—he was feeding swine! I do not know which would be most alarming—living among the Gentiles or the pigs, for both were considered unclean by the Jews (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8).

The Turning Point (Luke 15:16-17)

Finding himself thigh high in pig pods, the runaway lad comes to his senses and decides it would be better to be a slave in his father’s house than to be starving surrounded by swine. He, therefore, picks himself up out of the pig pen and goes to the father. Once again, had the young man learned his lessons in wisdom, he would have known, “Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame” (Proverbs 13:18) and “the righteous eat to their hearts’ content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry” (Proverbs 13:25).

The language of Luke 15:17, “he came to his senses,” is an indication of his openness to repentance. Throughout scripture, the image of one “returning” is tied to repentance. The language of “coming to one’s senses” indicates that the younger son had learned wisdom along life’s road of suffering.

The Confession (Luke 5:18-19)

To say that he has sinned “against heaven” is to say that he has sinned against God. We should note that the younger son takes full responsibility for his downfall. He alone has destroyed his relationship with his father and proven himself unworthy to be a son.

The Reunion (Luke 15:20)

This is my favorite verse in the Gospel of Luke, especially the words, “While he was still a long way off...” How many times had the father looked over the horizon to see if, just perhaps, today might be the day that his son would come home? Does God look over the horizon for you today? How many of us have waited for a letter, longed for a phone call, or yearned for a visit, hoping that our wayward son or long-gone daughter would finally come to his or her senses and return home?

The fact that the father sees him while he is still “a long way off” must surely mean that the father had searched every day for the silhouette of his son returning home. To “run” to his son, the father had to throw aside conventions of Oriental behavior. Such a father wouldn’t run to a son because the hurried pace was beneath the dignity of an Oriental leader because it suggests that he is not in control of his time or resources. For example, according to Sir 19:30, the nobleman is known by his gait, that is, by the slow, dignified pace that betokens his stature in the community.

The father’s love is unconditional. He accepts the boy before he utters a word of contrition.

The Celebration (Luke 15:21-22)

Even as the son is uttering his confession, the father begins reconciliation. The running, the embrace, the kiss, the robe, the ring, and the sandals all combine together to represent total acceptance, reconciliation and forgiveness. Honor has been restored to the once wayward son. The gifts themselves are a clear indication the father is not accepting him as a servant or a slave, but, rather, back as his own boy.

The killing of a fattened calf would indicate a village-wide celebration. Once deprived of food during the famine, now the son celebrates with the feast of the fattened calf.

The Resurrection (Luke 15:24)

Not once, but twice we are told in this parable (vs. 24 and 32) that the younger son was dead, but is alive again. It also repeats twice that he was lost, but is now found. The imagery of death and life could hardly be more powerful. There is no condition worse than being dead and no greater solution than being alive.

Famed preacher Fred Craddock once preached a sermon on the prodigal’s homecoming in Blue Ridge, a little town near where he lived and where he got his mail. Craddock followed the

lectionary text that day, which happened to be Luke 15. Following the preaching on the Prodigal Son, a man made a quick reply to Craddock, “I really didn’t care much for that, frankly.”

“Why?” asked the preacher.

“I guess it’s not your sermon. I just didn’t like that story.”

“Well, what did you not like about it?” the preacher asked.

“Well, it’s not morally responsible.”

“What do you mean by that?” the preacher responded.

“Forgiving that boy.”

“What would you have done?”

The man replied, “I think when he came home, he should have been arrested.”

The gentleman was serious. The preacher kept waiting for the joke, but there was none. This fellow, an attorney, belonged to the unofficial organization nationwide that never has any meetings and doesn’t have a name, but is a very strong network. These people are sometimes called the “quality control” or the “moral police.” They want to make sure that everybody gets a mandatory sentence for their sins with no parole. Actually, they prefer execution.

“Well,” responded the preacher, “what would you have given the prodigal?”

The attorney replied, “Six years!”

The attorney embodied the very spirit of the Pharisees listening to the parable told by Jesus.

The Elder Son (Luke 15:25-32)

See him now, the first born. The one who is going to get two-thirds of the inheritance. He, too, is part of the quality control network. He comes in from the field, hearing the joy of music and the laughter of dancing. “I don’t remember a party tonight,” he mumbles to himself under his breath. “What’s all the noise about?” he inquires of a servant.

“Haven’t you heard?” the servant replies. “Your brother has come home. Your father has killed the fattened calf because he received your brother back safe and sound.” But unlike his father, the elder son does not rejoice. He even refuses to be part of the reunion. The father comes out to the angry, elder boy and entreats him to join the celebration, to come to the dance.

Notice how carefully this parable is crafted by Jesus? The older son won’t even refer to the younger as “brother.” Instead, he labels him as “this son of yours” when speaking to the father. The older boy responds to the father’s reception of the younger son like the Pharisees respond to Jesus’ embrace of tax collectors and sinners (15:1-2). He, too, grumbles and is irritated by the joyous

celebration. There does seem, however, to be some clear logic to his position. While he is the son who has upheld both the interests of the father and the family, the wayward boy is receiving a celebration. We must certainly note that the father loved both boys, as he also went out to his older son, pleading with him to join the party (15:28b).

Conclusion

The older son's complaint reveals the wickedness of his heart. He is more concerned about the family's lost property than he is the lost brother who has been found. The older brother would live by Proverbs 13:18, "Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored." Sadly enough, the parable ends with the older brother standing outside, with an invitation to join the party. Before he can come in, however, he must realize that he, too, is a sinner who needs the grace of God. Interestingly enough, the chapter also closes with the Pharisees standing outside, not very likely to join the rejoicing of the recovery of sinners to this new Savior.

The brother was bitter because he focused on what he did not have and forgot what he did have. His father reminded him—and us—that he still had everything he had always had. He had his job. His place. His name. His inheritance. The only thing he didn't have was the spotlight. Because he wasn't content to share it, he missed the party.