

## THE PRODIGAL FATHER (Calven Celliers)

**Read Luke 15:1 & 2.** Evidently, Jesus' love attracted lost people from all classes and lifestyles. He was bringing them to a meaningful relationship with God. These were people who had no regard for the Torah or for religious traditions, and the religious sector got the mutters. Earlier on in the Gospel of Luke when the teachers of the law had also muttered and mumbled about the fact that Jesus mixed with sinners and ate with tax collectors, Jesus responded – **Read Luke 5: 30 & 31.** Religion condemns people for having dirty feet, but the Jesus we serve washes the feet of sinners. He made it very that He came to save fallen people, not self-righteous people; seeing the many needy people around Him who were lost and recognizing the criticism coming from the religious establishment who were just as lost, by the way, Jesus told three "Parables of Lostness." He talked about lost sheep who needed a shepherd; about a lost coin that had value and needed to be put back into circulation; about two lost sons who needed to encounter a compassionate father's love.

### **Read Luke 15: 11 – 32.**

Known most commonly as the '*Parable of the Prodigal Son*' I'd like to suggest that this parable should actually be known as the '*Parable of the Prodigal Father*', because the most startling act of extravagant and unrestrained love is exhibited in the way in which the Father responds to his two sons when he realizes that both of them were estranged from his Father-heart.

The word prodigal is defined as "having or giving something on a lavish scale, in a recklessly extravagant way.

Both sons were lost. The younger son who left home was obviously lost. The older son who never left home was also lost, but in a more subtle way. And the father pursues them both. Let us to consider how extravagant '*Father Love*' really is, regardless of who we are, where we're at, and how we respond.

*"There is no evil that the father's love cannot pardon and cover. There is no sin that is a match for his grace."* (Time Keller)

The first son was obviously lost. He was described as being in a "*distant country*." But Jesus drums the point that the father was ever hopeful that his son would return home someday and he would often cast a glance down the road just to see if today would be the day that the family could be back together again. When he saw him, he began to run. No amount of dignity could stop him. There was no reserve on his love. There was no period of restitution discussed. He did not keep him at a distance until his son measured up; until there were some guarantees that his son would not take advantage of him again. The son was not even able to give his well-rehearsed confession because the father was there so quickly! This initial embrace was followed by lavish, symbolic assurances of affection and sonship (*a robe, a ring, new sandals, and a feast*). All of these things speak of being restored as a son, not a servant as he requested!

The older son was lost in a more subtle way and the feasting brings this out. Jesus said that the elder son was "*in the field*" as opposed to the "*distant country*." He was responsible. He was industrious. He would never think of squandering his father's resources. And when he hears the sounds of a

celebration and understands that his younger brother has returned home, his mind is filled with questions as he approaches the house. *"Why is everyone celebrating? Why are the servants not working? Scripture says he approaches one of the servants, and when he's told that his brother has returned home, his mind is filled with even more questions: Why celebrate the homecoming of my dumb brother who's made my Father look like a fool? Why does he get the party? I've been here all of this time and never left once, and Dad never did anything like this for me? I've been doing this for all of these years and this is what I get for it? He got the calf and I didn't even get a goat!"* By the time he reached the house, he was so angry and jealous that he would not go inside. He would not dignify the celebration with his presence because favour and affection was something that you earned. I can hear the older brother's thoughts: *"I've earned the right to have a party in my honour. My brother has not earned it, and yet he's the one receiving it and that's wrong. I'm not running around for the likes of him."*

Whereas the younger brother blatantly entered the far country, this older brother had drifted into the same place over time inside his heart. He couldn't forgive. The elder son appears to be, at the end of the story, where the younger one was at the beginning: far away from home, estranged from his father. Some of us have gone into the far country much more subtly. We have not squandered our God-given resources and blessings, but what we have done is that we have wandered from our fullest God-given potential because of bad attitudes or negative thinking or an unforgiving spirit.

And if we look at this story in the broader context of what Jesus was addressing, we see the point He's making here. He was bringing people of all lifestyles back to God – prostitutes, the immoral, the demon-possessed, wealthy tax-collectors, and many who were simply disenchanted with religion who had strayed away. The marginalized in society were finding a place at God's banquet table because the Saviour was finding them and setting them free through forgiveness.

But, the religious establishment had a problem with that. They were the ones who had earned God's favour. According to them, it was their system of righteousness that must be followed in order to have God's favour. Jesus was making friends with all of these unbelievers and they were being brought back to God because they were seeing God's unmerited favour and grace, but the religious leaders didn't like it.

And Jesus is annoyed, less than impressed, because they of all people should have been rejoicing with the Saviour! The disenchanted wanderers are finding home again. But instead, they griped and complained. They were sheep that had never left the fold, but their hearts were far from the shepherd. They were the elder brother that refused to be a part of the festivities because bitterness and jealousy had slipped into their hearts. **Read Luke 15:7.**

I cannot help but feel that Jesus leaves us hanging, because we are never told what the elder brother does. Does he finally go inside and join in the celebration? Does he finally share in the joy? Does he forgive his younger brother and join his father inside or does he stay outside on the fringes of unforgiveness? The door is standing wide open for him and for us too...

Luke recounts that there are 2 groups of people who came to listen to Jesus that day. The tax collectors and sinners who correspond to the younger brother, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the religious people, who represented the elder brother.

*"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."*  
(C.S. Lewis)

The way we treat other people paints the truest picture of who we are. As Christ-followers we are called to love God and love people. May we never lose sight of what Jesus said - **Read John 13:35**. The way we live and treat others is the first word we speak about the transformational power of the Gospel in our own lives. We can talk a big game, but what *really* matters is how we play the game.

Many of us have served God faithfully for a long time. He has always loved you. He has cared for you in ways you're probably not even aware of, let alone the many ways you could testify to this morning. The challenge to us, however, is to honestly reflect on how many people never make it back to the Father's heart because of elder brothers in the family of God who are critical, judgemental, unforgiving; well-meaning people who impose their own version of spirituality on those trying to return home. Has anyone gone back into the far country because they met you at the front door? Imagine what would have happened if the younger son had met the elder brother on the road home? I want to challenge you to please search your hearts and check your attitudes toward those who have failed, or are lost.

And if you've wandered in somewhat apprehensively from the *"far country"*, my prayer is that you were met with the Father's love. It's time to come home. Perhaps you've been convicted this that you've squandered God's good gifts of life and blessing for too long. The lost younger son got up, left his empty lifestyle, and came home. That's what I'm going to ask you to do today. Everything that you've been looking for, you'll find in your Father's arms.

You see it doesn't matter if you're coming in from the *"far country"* of rebellion and sinfulness or if you're coming in from years of faithful labour in the *"local fields"*, the question you need to be able to answer is this: Have you ever truly experienced the gracious embrace of God? Prodigal love comes to all who fail; who repent and return home for a new start in life. One of the great lessons of this parable is that it teaches us about the kind of prodigal love that awaits us each and *every time*, we return to the Father from the *"far-country"* or even from the *"local fields"*.