

The Prodigal's Father

by J. Wilbur Chapman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding God's nature through the parable of the prodigal son, highlighting the father's love, compassion, and willingness to forgive.

Scripture: Psalm 103:12, Isaiah 1:19, Matthew 11:28, Luke 15:20, John 10:28, John 14:6, Acts 2:39, Romans 5:8, Ephesians 2:13, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Gods Love", "Forgiveness Through Christ"

Description

J. Wilbur Chapman preaches on the parable of the prodigal son, emphasizing the father's unconditional love, compassion, and readiness to forgive. He shares a powerful story of a son's return and the father's overwhelming joy, reflecting God's longing for every lost soul to come back to Him. Chapman highlights the importance of accepting God's gift of reconciliation through Jesus Christ, symbolized by the father's actions of embracing, clothing, and providing for his wayward son. He encourages listeners to trust in God's love, mercy, and willingness to forgive, no matter how far they may have strayed.

Transcript

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.. and had compassion, and ran.. and kissed him.. and said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it" (Luke 15:20-23).

Of making many sermons on the prodigal son, there seems to have been no end. Yet I was in the ministry fifteen years before I preached from any part of the parable. There may be many reasons why, as a rule, we turn away from it. It may be that the picture is too realistic.

I was standing in the prison chapel at Joliet, Illinois, when a request was made that I should conduct a service for the convicts. Just as I was leaving the building the officer said to me, "By the way, if you should come, do not preach upon any part of the prodigal. We have had twenty-four ministers here by actual count, and every one of them gave us the prodigal son, and these poor fellows have had about as much prodigal as they can stand."

It may also be that we have turned away from it because it is such familiar ground that it has lost its charm for us. I was sweeping through the magnificent Rocky Mountain scenery some time ago, and when we had plunged into the Royal Gorge, and later swung into the Grand Canon, it seemed to me that scenery more sublime could not be found in all the world, and if I had never been impressed before with the existence of

God, I should have cried out unto Him in the midst of those mountain peaks. I noticed that every one in the car, with one single exception, was gazing in rapt admiration. This one woman was intently reading a book, and to my certain knowledge, she did not lift her eyes once from the printed page while we were in that wonderful scenery. When we had swung out into the great table land, I overheard her say to a friend, "This is the thirteenth time I have crossed the mountains. The first time I could not keep the tears from rolling down my cheeks, so impressed was I, but now," she said, "I know it so well that I frequently go through the whole range with scarcely a glance cast out the window." It is thus, alas! that we read God's Word, and that which fills Heaven with wonder, and furnishes the angels a theme for never-ending praise, we read with indifference or fail to read at all. And yet my own confession is that I never have had, until recently, the best of this story of the prodigal.

I thought it was to give us a vision of the younger son, and as such it would be a message to backsliders; and while this is one part of the interpretation it is not by any means the best part. Then it occurred to me the story might have been given us that we should take warning from the selfishness of the elder brother; but I conceived such a dislike for this character that I never cared to consider him even for a moment. But it has in these later days become to me one of the sweetest portions of all the New Testament because I believe the parable was written that we might fasten our eyes upon the father of the parable and in that father get a glimpse of God.

It may be interesting to know how this sermon was born. I was sitting in my room in the Dennison Hotel, in Indianapolis, in November, 1894, looking into the face of my friend, E. P. Brown, the editor of the "Ram's Horn." I had known him in the days of his infidelity and had feared him because of his bitterness. I had heard him in some of his violent outbreaks against God and the truth, and this was the first privilege I had had of any extended conversation with him since his remarkable conversion, under Mr. Moody's preaching in his own church in Chicago, when the theme was the father of this prodigal. I had heard repeated accounts of the conversion, and so I said to him, "Tell me, if you will, how you found Christ." To my amazement he said, "I think I was born again when I was eighteen years of age." This to me was startling; for a more violent infidel I had never known than this man in the days that were past. But said he, "I do not mean that I was born into the kingdom of God, but rather into the conception that my father loved me. To this thought I had always been a stranger, and that," said he, "was the beginning of a remarkable series of events all of which culminated in my conversion." Then he told me this story.

A Father's Love

"I was a wayward boy, and did many things that caused my father much anguish of heart, because I did not know that he was my friend. We never were near together. There was no communion of love between us, and the thought that I was anything to him never entered my mind; and so, when only a boy, I took my destiny into my own hands and ran away. Just as I was coming into manhood I was taken sick, and out of sheer necessity I was obliged to turn my face toward father's house, for I had been prodigal with my earnings, and had saved nothing for the time of need. There was no other friendly roof to which I could look for shelter, and so I had to go back home. I was given a friendly welcome, but in a few days I repented to the bottom of my soul that I had come. My father was very poor, and was himself just convalescing from a long illness. Every dollar that he earned cost him the most laborious effort and continual pain. I found that there was not bread for all, and to spare, but only a few crumbs for each. There was famine and want and hardship of which I had not dreamed, and the bread I took from my poor father's table almost choked me, for it seemed to have the taste of blood upon it. It was agony to stay there and be a burden upon my parents, and I could not endure it. It would be better, I thought, to go out and die in the

highway rather than live by eating bread which cost so much. And so after I had gained some strength I told father I would have to go. He begged me to stay, and said that times would surely brighten up soon, but I couldn't do it; I had to go.

"When he saw that I was determined not to stay, his face took on the saddest look I had ever seen him have, as he took his hat and cane to walk a short distance with me. We walked on slowly and almost silently together for perhaps a half a mile, when my father grew so weary he said he would have to go back. My parting with him at that time is one of the sad scenes in my life I never can forget. As he took me by the hand he said, with a voice trembling with emotion,

"I never wanted to be rich before, my boy, as I do today. God knows it almost kills me to see you leaving home because your father is so poor. Don't go, my son; don't go. Come back with me, and help will surely come from somewhere. I can't bear to see you go in this way while you are still almost sick. You may die from want. Come back! As long as we have a crust there is a part of it for you, and while we have a roof over us there is no need for you to be without a home.'

"But when he saw that my mind was fixed, and that nothing he could say would induce me to change my decision, he said, oh, how sadly -

"Good-by! good-by! God bless you. If we never meet in this life again, I hope we'll meet in Heaven.'

"And then as he softly and reluctantly let go of my hand, he turned and started to go home, but he only took a step or two and then stopped and spoke my name, and as he did so I turned, and as my father also turned toward me I saw a tear leave his eye and wind down his cheek. It was the first tear I had ever seen my father shed for me. As he stepped forward he put his hand into his pocket and took out something. The next instant he pressed a fifty-cent piece into my hand and then turned, without another word, and walked away.

"I watched him as far as I could see him, with something in my heart that had never been there before, and then went on my way happier than I had ever been in all my life, for now I knew that father loved me, and the moment I knew it I also loved him. When he gave me that fifty-cent piece, I knew what it meant. I knew that it was every cent he had on earth, and I knew what great pain and labor it had cost. It was all that he could do for me, and in the gift I saw my father's heart. I knew that he would have given me a fortune just as gladly, had it been his to give, and as I realized this, I repented that I had ever caused him a single anxious thought. I would have given anything just then to have blotted out the past. I resolved that from that day I would be a different son to him, and thank God I was. I went out into the cold and snow that morning better and stronger and braver than I had ever been before, because I knew at last that my father loved me. It was cold and cheerless outside, but warm and bright within. All day long something seemed to be singing in my heart -- "Father loves me! Father loves me!" All my life I had been hungering for just such a moment as this. It was a great turning point in my life. From that hour father was first in all my thoughts and all my plans. I determined that day that I would live for him, that I would live to help him in the hard battle he had to fight with the world. My first aim in life would be to make life easier for him, and from that hour I never consciously caused him another pang. One of the things for which I am most grateful to God today is, that He put it in my power to place father and mother in their own home, and during several of the last years of their lives relieve them from all temporal care.

"The change in my life as a son was caused by the change in my belief in regard to my father. There was no change in him. He had always loved me just as much as he did on the morning when I discovered the

state of his heart, but I had not believed that he did, and so I had behaved accordingly. When my belief changed my conduct changed. I suppose that father had always been anxious that I should know that he loved me, and had no doubt been trying in hundreds of ways to make the fact known to me, just as God has always been trying to make known His love to sinful man; but until the moment came when he could make the sacrifice for me, there was no way under heaven by which he could show me his heart. My extremity was his opportunity.

"And so," he said, "when I heard Mr. Moody preach his wonderful sermon on the father in this story I said to myself, 'If God is like that, I want to know Him.'" This in brief was the story of his conversion.

Did it ever occur to you that in the pictures of the fathers of the Bible you were always given a vision of one part of the nature of God? Jacob crying out, "Me ye have bereft of my children: Joseph is not, Simeon is not, and now you will take Benjamin from me," is an illustration of God crying out in His great tenderness over the lost. David exclaiming, "Oh, Absalom, my son, my son I would God I had died for thee," is just a hint as to the way God feels over His own lost ones for whom His Son has really died. And yet better than any picture of a father as the revelation of God is the life of the Son of God from whose lips we have heard these words, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." But putting all these things together, and in the light of them reading the story of the prodigal, our hearts burn within us as we see God.

"But When He Was Yet A Great Way Off"

These words must have a wonderful meaning, for the measurement is from God's standpoint. It would be an awful thing to be a great way off according to man's conception, but when it is the computation of One who is infinite we are startled; and yet our amazement gives way instantly to adoration, for we are told that even if we are so great a distance from Him we are not to be discouraged. In Acts 2:39, we read that the promise is unto "all that are afar off," and in Ephesians 2:13, 17, we are told that "Ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ," and that Jesus Christ "came and preached peace to you which were afar off," as well as to them that were nigh. It never is any question with God as to how deeply one has sinned. It is a remarkable thing that throughout the whole Bible He has ever chosen the most conspicuous sins and the most flagrant sinners that He might present to us His willingness to forgive.

God requires but three things if we would know Him in this way.

First, there must be a willing mind. In Isaiah 1:19, we read, "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land." In another place we read, "If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted for what a man hath and not for what he hath not." In still another place we are told, "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine." God Himself, infinite though He may be, will not save us against our wills.

Second, there must be a desire to know the truth that we may do it. Mere knowledge of the truth may be our condemnation, and it is the saddest thing in the world that so many people know and yet are unwilling to do. It will be an awful judgment which must finally fall upon the rank and file of men because all their lives they lived under the shadow of the church and heard the preaching of the Word, all of which condemns them.

The third requirement is an honest confession of one's intentions. God never gives to one more light than he uses, but if there is in the heart a single desire, however faint, to know Him, and that desire is confessed before men and unto God, He enlarges our vision, sheds upon us more abundant light, and it is always by the way of confession that we enter into the fullness of joy.

"His Father Saw Him"

Mr. Moody says that that father was looking through the telescope of his love. I have always felt that he was looking through his tears. It is said that when astronomers want to increase the scope of their vision they add to the number of lenses, and sometimes our falling tears are like the lenses in the telescope. They bring objects far removed nigh unto us.

But what a comfort it is to know that the Great Father of us all looks after us with a pity that is infinite, and with a sympathy that is beyond conception. The vision of the father of the prodigal was limited, but God's eye sweeps through all space, and He sees us wherever we are. He can even behold our thoughts, and when you bowed your head and said, "I ought to come," and partly lifted your hand as an expression of your intention, or started to rise that you might make public your confession, He saw you and was ready to run to meet you. This is all that he requires on your part. He is ready to do all the rest.

It is said that Dr. Rainsford, of England, in one of the Northfield conferences at one time related the story of an old friend of his, a German professor, who was an agnostic; and as you know the creed of the agnostic is simply, "I do not know." This old professor came to visit Dr. Rainsford and went with him to all the services of his church. When the day was ended the rector said to him, "Professor, tell me what you think of it all." His answer was, "It is beautiful, but that is all I can say." Then Dr. Rainsford put to him these questions:

First, "Do you not think that it is possible that there may be a God?" and the old professor said, "Yes, possible."

Second, "Then do you not think that it is probable that God has made a revelation of Himself to His creatures?" and his friend answered, "Yes, probable."

Third, "Well, do you not think," said he, "that He would make that revelation plain if we were to ask Him?" and the old professor answered, "I should think He would be obliged to."

"Well," said Dr. Rainsford, "have you ever asked Him?" and the old man answered, "No."

"For my sake," said he, "will you ask Him now?" and they fell upon their knees in the study, and the old minister said, "Lord God, reveal Thyself unto my dear friend." When his prayer was ended he said, "Now, Professor, you pray," and the old man lifted his eyes and said, "O, God," and then as if he felt he had gone too far, he changed his petition, and said, "O, God, if there be a God, show me the light and I will "and he was just going on to say, "I will walk in it," when suddenly he sprang to his feet with his face radiant and shouted, "Why, I see it, I see it, and it is glorious!" His agnosticism took wings and departed from him. Faith filled his heart and joy thrilled in his soul. He has from that time to this been a good disciple of Jesus Christ. In the light of all this I make the plea; only encourage your least desire, and you shall come to know Him whom to know is life eternal.

"He Had Compassion And Ran"

I never knew until recently what that word "compassion" meant. I know now that it indicates one's suffering with another. It is this that makes the story of a man's transgression so pathetic. Other hearts are made to ache and almost break. Other eyes are filled with tears and other lives made desolate. I can see this old father going up to the outlook from his home gazing off in the direction which his boy had taken, coming down the steps again like David of old crying out, "Oh, my son, my son, would God I had died for you!" He

had compassion.

We had in our city a young man who was more than ordinarily prosperous in his business, and his prosperity seemed to be the cause of his downfall. It became so marked that his partners called him into their office to say that he must either mend his ways or dispose of his interests in the concern. His promises were good, and all went well for a little season, and then when the failure was worse than ever they insisted that he should dispose of his interests to them, and with a great sum of money he began to sink rapidly. He had gone from bad to worse until not long ago they found him floating in the river, for he had taken his own life. The story is sad in the extreme, but the saddest portion of it is found in the fact that there is an old man today going about the streets of the city mourning for his son. He scarcely lifts his eyes from the ground as he walks. Sometimes you behold him with the tears rolling down his cheeks. He has compassion. And it is a fact that one never sins, breaking even the least of God's commandments, that the heart of the great and loving Father does not yearn over him and long for his return.

What Did He Do?

We all know this story so thoroughly well that it would seem almost unnecessary to emphasize things the father did when the meeting between himself and his son occurred, but for the sake of the story let me say:

First, "he kissed him." You will notice that he did not wait until the boy's garments had been changed, or the signs of his wanderings removed. There would have been no grace in this. But clad in all his rags, he threw his arms about him and drew him close against his heart, and gave him the kiss which was the sign of complete reconciliation. This is what Jesus Christ waits to give to every wandering soul. The old hymn says, "My God is reconciled," and this is the teaching of the Scriptures. It is not necessary that I should work myself up into a fever of excitement, nor weep and wail in the depths of my despair, but it is necessary only that I should receive what God offers me in Jesus Christ. The first step in the Christian life is an acceptance of that which comes from above.

We had in Philadelphia a young man belonging to one of the better families, so-called, who by his wayward actions disgraced his father and finally broke his heart. After a little he left his home, went to Baltimore, from there to Washington, and after months of wandering determined to return. He was ashamed to meet the members of his family, but he knew that if he made a peculiar sound at the door at the midnight hour, there was one who would hear and understand; and when he stood before that door it was swung open and without a word of reproach his mother bade him welcome. The next morning he did not come down from his room, the second morning he was ashamed to come, but the third morning as he descended the stairway, his brother, a physician, met him and said, "Edward, mother is dying." She had been suddenly stricken down and was anxious to see him. He made his way into her room, knelt beside her bed and sobbed out, "Oh, mother, I beseech you forgive me!" and with her last departing strength she drew close to him, placed her lips close to his ear, and said, "My dear boy, I would have forgiven you long ago if you had only accepted it." This is a picture of God. With a love that is infinite, and a pity beyond description, He waits to save every one who will but simply receive His gift of life.

Second, I have always imagined that when the father started out from the house running to meet his boy, that the servants must have noticed him, and possibly they ran after him. When the father saw the condition of the son, I can hear him as he turned to the approaching servants to say, "Run, bring the best robe and put it on him"; and it is a beautiful thing to me to know that when they brought the robe the father

wrapped it round about him, thus covering over all the signs of his wanderings. This is what God does for me and for you. The moment we believe, the robe of Christ's righteousness is placed about us, and God looks upon us as without spot or blemish, for we are at once accepted in the beloved.

I remember that when Jonathan was dead and David wanted to do something for some one that belonged to him, the only one he could find upon whom he might lavish his affection was poor, little, lame Mephibosheth. He was lame on both his feet, you will remember, (his nurse had dropped him as she was fleeing away from the enemy), but when David found him he placed him at the king's table and in such a position that his lameness was hidden; and if you had been on the opposite side from him you never would have known that he had a mark of deformity about him. This is what God does for every poor, wandering, lost one that comes to Him. "I, even I, am He that blotteth out all thy transgressions, and I will remember them against you no more forever."

Third, he put the ring on his hand. The ring is always the emblem for completeness. And this was a beautiful illustration of the fact that the father's love was perfect, and that this love had not been affected by the wanderings of the boy. This is certainly true of God, and I know no better figure to give a thought of His love than that of the ring.

"For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind,
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind."

Fourth, he put shoes on his feet. I can see the poor boy as he hobbles on to meet his father, his feet bleeding at every step, for the shoes were worn and he walked with difficulty; but when he was well shod with shoes from the king's house, I can see him taking the hand of the old father and running back to his home. One of the commonest excuses presented by men for not yielding to Christ is the fear that they may not hold out, but to me it is comforting to know that the moment we are saved He puts shoes on our feet and that we are shod with the preparation of the Gospel of Peace.

Mr. Sankey tells the story of his boy who was with him, when a little fellow, in Scotland, and for the first time he possessed what in that country is known as a top coat. They were walking out one cold day, and the way was slippery. The little fellow's hands were deep down in his pockets. His father said to him, "My son, you had better let me take your hand," but he said you never could persuade a boy with a new top coat to take his hands from his pockets. They reached a slippery place and the boy had a hard fall. Then his pride began to depart and he said, "I will take your hand," and he reached up and clasped his father's hand the best he could. When a second slippery place was reached, the clasp was broken and the second fall was harder than the first. Then all his pride was gone, and raising his little hand he said, "You may take it now"; and his father said, "I clasped it round about with my great hand and we continued our walk; and when we reached the slippery places," said he, "the little feet would start to go and I would hold him up." This is a picture for the Christian. I am saved not so much because I have hold of God as because God has hold of me, and He not only gives me shoes with which I may walk and which never wear out, but Christ holds my hand in His, and I shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck me out of His hand; and His Father is greater, and no man shall ever pluck me out of His Father's hand; and so between the hand of God and the hand of Christ I am secure.

"And They Killed For Him The Fatted Calf"

I can see the old father as he runs from home to home exclaiming, "Come in and rejoice with me, for my boy was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found," and they begin to be merry. One can never have the fatted calf killed for him but once, but one of the delightful things about the Christian life is that we may repeatedly sit down to enjoy the feast for others, and it is thrilling to know that we never have a time of feasting here that they do not have a time of rejoicing in Heaven, "For there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."

At the close of a meeting in Joliet, Illinois, I sat down beside an honored evangelist, Rev. H. W. Brown, and among other things in his career, he told me this story. A number of years before he had a remarkable work of grace in the lake region of Wisconsin in that town of the strange name, Oconomowoc. After his work of grace he returned one day for a little visit, and as he stepped off from the cars he saw at the station an old man named James Stewart. Knowing him well, he asked him why he was there. The old man replied that his boy had gone away from home, and had said to him, "Father, I will return some day, but I can not tell when," and said he, "I am waiting for him to come back." Strange as it may seem, thirteen years afterward he revisited that old town, and the first man he saw when getting off from the cars was this old father. He had forgotten his story, but he met him, saying, "Mr. Brown, he hasn't come yet, but he will come, and I am waiting." "Just then," said my friend, "I lifted up my eyes and saw one walking down the aisle of the car, and said to myself, If I was not sure that the boy was dead, I would say that that was the son." But other eyes had seen him too, and with a great bound the old father sprang to the steps of the car, and when the boy reached the platform, in less time than I can tell it, he was in his father's arms. The old father sobbed out, "Oh, my son, thank God, you've come, you've come"; and then, turning to my friend, he said, "Mr. Brown, I should have waited until I died." Thus God waits, and looks and yearns and loves. Thus Jesus Christ entreats us to look unto Him, and be saved, and in His name I bid you come.

"Thy sins I bore on Calvary's tree,
The stripes, thy due, were laid on Me,
That peace and pardon might be free,
Oh, weary sinner, come!
Go leave thy burden at the cross,
Count all thy gains but empty dross,
My grace repays all earthly loss,
Oh, needy sinner, come!"

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