

Prodigal People

by John Vissers

The sermon explores the parable of the prodigal son, emphasizing God's unconditional love and the importance of welcoming all back into the family of God.

Duration: 33:33

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 15:11-32

Topics: "Prodigal"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker explores the parable of the prodigal son from the perspective of each of its three main characters. The parable tells the story of a younger son who squanders his inheritance in a distant country and ends up working in the fields feeding pigs. After hitting rock bottom, he decides to return to his father and confess his sins. The father, filled with compassion, welcomes him back with open arms, disregarding his past mistakes. The sermon emphasizes the themes of repentance, forgiveness, and the unconditional love of God.

Transcript

Please turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the Gospel according to Luke chapter 15 and reading at verse 11 through to the end of verse 32. A passage that I'm sure is familiar to many of us, the parable of the lost son or the parable of the prodigal son. One of the parables of the kingdom told by our Lord.

Let us hear the word of God. Jesus continued, there was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, father, give me my share of the estate.

So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth and wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired men have food to spare? And here I am starving to death.

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son through his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything that I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Amen.

And may God bless to us this reading from his word this morning. Let's bow in prayer, shall we? Prepare our hearts and our minds, O Lord, to receive your word this morning. Silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing your word we may also obey your will through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. At the best of times, family life can be very challenging. The relationships between parents and children can be the source of both the greatest joys, but also the greatest tribulations and frustrations in life.

The story is told, for example, about a father and a son who are having a heated argument one day about the son's future. And the father was upset that his son, who was already by this time a young adult, had not made any decisions concerning his own future about what he was going to do with his life. And so he said to the son, do you realize that by the time Sir John A. McDonald was your age, he was already studying to become a lawyer? And without a moment's hesitation, the son shot back, right, dad.

And when Sir John A. McDonald was your age, he was already the Prime Minister of Canada. Almost everyone, I think, can identify with that kind of a conversation, whether as a son or a daughter, a mother or a father, a brother or a sister, a husband or a wife, an aunt or an uncle, or perhaps even as a grandparent, we've all found ourselves in family relationships that are at times strained. We've all experienced those times in life when our love for those closest to us is severely tested.

Often in our family relationships, of course, we experience the most intense of emotions, love as well as hate, the ecstasy of joy as well as the depths of sadness and despair. And I suspect that this is one of the reasons why the New Testament frequently describes life within the Kingdom of God in terms of a family,

and why one of the images for the Church in the New Testament is indeed the image of a family. And it's probably the reason why Jesus used a powerful story about a family to describe our relationship to God.

The parable of the prodigal son is a story, a parable about a family, a family that knows both love and hate, that knows both joy and sadness, that knows both acceptance and jealousy, a family that has both great expectations but also knows the deepest of disappointments. And you know this story well, and we've read it. Jesus says there was a man who had two sons, and the younger son received and received his inheritance from the father.

And he went away, he took the money and he went to a distant country where he squandered it in wild and riotous living. And after he had spent everything that he had, there was a downturn in the economy. A depression rolled across the land, a famine, and soon he realized that he was in serious trouble.

He had to find some means of supporting himself because he no longer had his inheritance. And so he hired himself out as a servant to work in the fields to feed the pigs. And after barely being able to survive on his income, he came to his senses and he realized that it was time to move home again.

Because he knew that on his father's estate, even the servants were being treated better than he now was being treated. So he decided to return to the father's house. And he decided to ask that he be taken back not as a son, not as one of the family, but simply as a hired servant.

But as the story continues on his return, a wonderful thing happens. The father goes out seeing the son and welcomes the son back unconditionally into the family as a son. And the father ordered that he be draped in the best robe, that the family ring be put on his finger, that new sandals be put on his feet, and the whole household celebrated the return of the son with a great party, a great celebration.

One can imagine the kind of joy that was there on that occasion in that family. The whole household, that is, except for the older brother. The older brother comes in from the fields and seas and hears that there's a party going on.

And Jesus says that this brother was not very happy with this turn of events. And upon realizing that the party is being given in honor of his brother, he refuses to join in the banquet. He refuses to welcome his brother home.

He stands outside in a jealous rage. After all, he had been the faithful son. He had not run off and spent money on wine, women, and song.

He was the obedient son. And yet his father had never even given him a small party with his friends for all of his efforts, while the younger brother, who squandered everything, is welcomed home and given this great celebration. And the story does not end on a happy note.

The older brother refused to come in, even when the father goes out and pleads with him and begs him and invites him to come in. The brother refused. That moment must have been both the moment of greatest joy for the father, but the moment of his most intense pain.

Joy because his younger son, who had wandered away, had come home, but intense pain and sadness because the older brother's sulking jealousy spoiled the homecoming. And the Bible, my friends, is not a Pollyannish book. It portrays reality as reality is, and the story ends on this note.

The parable ends, the parable of Jesus ends on this kind of a downward, sour note. But Jesus, of course, is describing a reality which extends beyond family life. Yes, this is a story about a rebellious son who goes against the will of his father.

Yes, this is a story about a jealous older brother who resents the father's unconditional love. And yes, this is a story about a father's extravagant love for both of his sons. But the parable is a story about the kingdom of God.

It's a story which is intended to help us understand our relationship with God and our relationship to one another within the kingdom of God. This parable, I suggest to you this morning, is like a diamond. And as you hold it up, you realize that there are different facets to this diamond.

As you hold it up to the light, you realize there is much more to this story than first meets the eye. And I suggest to you this morning that we need to look at this parable from the perspective of each of its three main characters in order to fully grasp its meaning. We need to let the light reflect off of each facet of this parabolic diamond, as it were, in order to identify what Jesus is saying and to identify with the kinds of things that Jesus is saying about prodigal people in relation to God and in relation to one another.

And so let's look just very briefly at each of the main characters as we turn this diamond and look at its various facets. First, there is the younger brother, whom tradition describes as the prodigal son. And his story is really told in verses 11 to 24.

And as we hold up this first facet of this parable to the light, we are struck by what it reveals to us about this younger son, about this younger brother. One meaning of the word prodigal is reckless and wasteful. The prodigal son is the reckless son.

He is the wasteful son. He's the rebel. He's the one who leaves home.

He's the one who deeply wounds his father's heart by asking for his inheritance. And as the commentators remind us, it's as if this son comes to the father and says, I wish that you were dead so that I can get what is coming to me now and get on with my life. And he takes the money, the inheritance which his father gives him, and he runs as far away as he can from his father and from his family.

The first person I think that Jesus wishes us to identify with in this parable is the prodigal son. Jesus intended that we see the father as God and ourselves as prodigal children. You see, the purpose of the story is to encourage sinners to repent regardless of how much they have degraded themselves.

We live as prodigal people in a prodigal culture, in a prodigal world, a culture, a generation that is in flight from God, that is reckless and that is wasteful. We live in a generation that essentially has said to God, I wish that you were dead. And we live our lives as if God were dead.

We've squandered a spiritual heritage in order to satisfy our longing for bigger houses, for faster cars, for more efficient computers and for more frequent holidays to the South. Our commitments to the things of eternal value have been replaced by life's fatal attractions. But life's hidden addictions, of course, do not give us life.

They consume us. They consume us. One Christian writer describes our generation in this way.

He says, our addictions make us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfillment, accumulation of wealth and power, attainment of status and admiration, lavish consumption of food and drink and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. The addicted life, he says, can aptly be designated a life lived in a distant country. Beneath it all is the great unspoken curse, I wish you were dead.

If ever there was a generation and a culture that could be described as prodigal, it is our generation and our culture in flight from God. The great church father, Augustine, describes prodigal people as those with darkened hearts. A darkened heart, he says, is the far country, for it is not by our feet but by our affections that we either leave God or return to God.

But there is evidence at the same time in our culture and in our world that people are beginning to come to their senses in this far country to which our generation is run. When the prodigal son found himself knee deep in pig slop with cramping stomach and convincing conscience, he decided to do something about it. He pushed through the squealing pig, stomped the mud off his feet, and he headed for his father's house.

And when life's hidden addictions consume us only to spit us out again, when life's fatal attractions don't bring what we expect them to bring and bring us rather to the point of death, when life's most promising experiences fail to deliver fulfillment to us, when we come to the end of ourselves, then we come to our senses. When we are hungry and thirsty, then we look for water and for bread. When we have spent all that we have on foolishness and our resources are to find what pleaded, then we're ready to look for what is real.

When we realize the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence, then we're ready to go home. Thomas Oden, the American Methodist theologian, puts it this way. He says, today many people are disillusioned.

They've tried drugs and therapy and self-help groups and myriads of other 12-step programs and modern pathways to meaning without success, and they're ready now to come home. Prodigal people have found themselves in a wasteland without God and without hope in the world. But the good news of this parable is, of course, that you can always go home again.

No matter how far we flee from God, God does not give up on us. The poet Francis Thompson reminds us that the hound of heaven is relentless in his pursuit of us. You see, the gospel is good news for prodigal people, for people of our generation.

Perhaps some of you here this morning are refugees from a culture in decline. Perhaps your personal life is in a state of turmoil. No matter how far you are from God this morning, the good news of this parable is that you can always, always come home.

But we need quickly to move on, then, to the second facet of this parable, which brings us to the elder brother in verses 25 to 32. As we turn the parable in another direction, we are struck by what is revealed through this facet about the elder brother. He is the one who resents his father's unconditional willingness to accept the younger brother back into the family, without any questions asked.

He is angry. He is angry because he is resentful. He is jealous of the love lavished upon the younger brother, and he too is in the far country, even though he has never left home.

Now, some commentators, and I tend to agree with them, think that it's quite clear here that Jesus had in mind the Pharisees, that he intended the elder brother to be a picture of the religious leaders, because they saw themselves as the faithful ones. They saw themselves as the servants of God. And now here was Jesus in his preaching and in his teaching, in the highways and the byways, going out and inviting prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners and all kinds of undesirable people into the kingdom of heaven.

Who did Jesus think he was anyway? This was not the plan of God. They were angry, and they resented Jesus' unconditional love and his unconditional acceptance of sinners and his invitation to them to come home and to repent. And Jesus' point in the story is that we should rejoice in the salvation of others and not be jealous or resentful.

Many of us as Christians and many of us as Presbyterian Christians are too often like the older brother sometimes. Some of us have been faithful members of the church for many years. We've contributed generously.

We've worked hard over the years. And then some new people come along and get involved in our church. They're sons and daughters of those who have been sons and daughters who have been far away in the distant country.

They're a generation which has been in flight from God, but they're starting to come to their senses. They're starting to come home. They're starting to come back to God.

They're ready to come back to God. And how do we react? Well, sometimes rather than rejoicing in their salvation and opening our arms and welcoming in them just as God our Father does, we resent them. We resent the welcome that they receive.

We resent the changes they inevitably bring into our lives and into the life of the church. And the sad truth is that some of us are prodigal people in the far country even though we've never left the church. Our hearts are hardened somehow and bitter and angry perhaps because people have done things to us.

We're jealous. We've lived under the same roof as the Father, but somehow we just have not come to know and experience the reality of the Father's love. You know, sometimes we can be so close and yet so far away.

And Jesus wants us to understand this morning that God's love is extravagant and lavish and that no one earns it. You see, the reality that strikes us in this parable is that the Father loves the younger son because he is a son and for no other reason. And he loves the elder brother because he is a son and for no other reason, not because of what he has done somehow to earn his Father's love.

And that, my friends, brings us to the very heart of the gospel in this parable. It brings us to what ought to be at the very heart of the church's life, that recognizing that being a Christian does not mean that somehow you need to earn God's favor. Recognizing that God loves you unconditionally.

And most of us, even after we become Christians, feel that somehow we have to do something to make God love us more. And this parable reminds us that God loves us as his children, unconditionally. The gospel of this parable is not a gospel of self-justification, but justification by grace through faith alone.

And it frees us to live for God and for others. And because we then are accepted and come to understand and know this love and grace of God in our lives, it ought to transform us into opening our arms of

welcome to those whom God is inviting into his kingdom. Perhaps God needs to do a work in your heart this morning, even though you're not far away in the country outside, but you've been in the far country within the church.

And this brings us then to our third and final turn of the parable. Because Jesus, I think, in the end, wants us also to understand and to identify with the Father, who demonstrates an extraordinarily lavish and extravagant love for both his sons. And this theme runs throughout the entire parable, right from verse 11 through to verse 32.

I want to suggest to you this morning, and perhaps some of you have never looked at the parable in this way, but I want to suggest to you this morning that there are some of you who need to see this parable from the perspective of the Father. While it is true that the Father in the story symbolizes God, it is also true, I think, that we are given an example of God's love and God's grace, which ought to overwhelm us and inspire us to be conformed to the image of our Lord. And the reality is that some of you are here this morning, and you have been deeply wounded by your own children, by those you love.

Perhaps you have a son or a daughter from whom you are estranged. Perhaps your relationship has been strained to the limit or even irreconcilably broken, it seems to you. God's word to you this morning is one of waiting patiently in love and praying patiently, just as the prodigal father did.

Some of you here this morning have children who have rejected the Christian faith and been alienated from the Church. And with many of their generation, they are in the far country, they are in the distant country. And God understands this morning the pain and the hurt of your life, because he too is a waiting father.

He too is a waiting parent. He too is waiting for his children to come home. And he has not given up, so neither should you.

You see, the word prodigal we usually take to mean reckless and wasteful and lost. But the word prodigal has another meaning to it. It also means extravagant and lavish.

And the good news of the Gospel is that God's love was so great, so extravagant, so lavish, that he sent his son, his own son, into the far country of our world, of our sinful, of our fallen world, in order to find and to save his lost children. You see, the reality of this parable is that our God is a prodigal God. And in Jesus Christ, he has journeyed into the depths of his creation to save the lost.

To save the lost. During the Korean War, the phone rang in a fashionable home on the east coast of the United States. And to his astonished delight, the gentleman who answered the phone found himself speaking to his son.

There had been long months of silence during his absence in Korea, where he was fighting in the war. And now he was both startled but also delighted to hear that his son was on the west coast and that he was on his way home. Dad, he said, I just wanted to let you know that I'm bringing a friend home with me from the war.

And he's been hurt very badly and he only has one eye and one arm and one leg and I'd sure like him to come and live with us because he's my friend. He has no other family and I want him to be a part of our family, for us to welcome him in. Sure, son, the father said, he sounds like a brave man.

I think we could find room for him for a while. No, dad, you don't understand. I want him to come and live with us always to be a part of our family, for us to welcome him in as one of us, unconditionally, with open arms.

Because he has no one else and he's been hurt very badly. Son, the father said, you're being unrealistic about this. You're being emotional because you've been in war.

That boy will be a drag on you and a drag on this whole family. We can't possibly accept and welcome that kind of a person, unconditionally, as part of our family. And suddenly the phone clicked dead.

And the next day the parents received a telegram from the army and it crushed them because the night before their son had leaped to his death from the 12th floor of his San Diego hotel, and a week later they received his body. And they looked down with unspeakable sorrow on the corpse of their one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged son. God this morning is calling us to be prodigal people.

Not prodigals who are lost in the far country and in flight from God. Not prodigals who are lost within the father's house and still so far away from him in a jealous rage. But prodigals who, having come home and having experienced the welcoming and gracious and loving arms of the father, the unconditional welcome, having experienced that, are prepared then to welcome others into the kingdom of God.

To welcome the wounded. To welcome the hurting. To welcome those who have come to the end of themselves.

To welcome those who are sick and suffering and dying. To welcome them into the kingdom of God. Just as God our father does.

Let us pray. Gracious God our father, this morning we are reminded of both the depth and the richness and the profundity of your grace and your gospel. Help us to take these few words and apply them in our own lives so that we truly might live for you in these days.

Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

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