

SM046 The Prodigal Son and His Prodigal Father – Part 1

Jesus was having dinner with his disciples, and at the dinner special guests reclined with him in a festive atmosphere. Were the special guests, political leaders? No. Were they religious leaders? Not on this occasion. The special guests were people who had failed miserably in their lives. Among them were tax collectors, considered traitors to the people, and moral failures, people who had strayed far from the commandments of God.

Another group was at attendance in this meal – religious leaders. They were not feasting with Jesus and his motley group of friends. They were standing with other villagers along the walls of the banqueting room watching ... and disapproving.

“Jesus is spending far too much time with these people,” one whispered.

“No, brother,” another said. “It is not just the amount of time with them. Jesus has welcomed them. He is hosting this meal for them and blessing them. He is enjoying their company.”

Another said, “This is scandalous! These people are cursed. With their loose morals and questionable patriotism, they are the poisonous root of our nation’s problems. It is because of them that God had not fulfilled his promises and Romans and Greeks fill our land.”

The religious leaders continued to watch and continued to fume as Jesus enjoyed the meal with these wretched people, and they enjoyed him! How they flocked to Jesus – like sheep to a shepherd! They loved him. He welcomed and loved them. He said it was possible for them to return to a loving God and learn His ways. Jesus gave them a fresh start and he treated them as if they were among his dearest friends!

During the meal Jesus had already told two stories. He told the story of a heroic shepherd who endangered his life in search of a lost lamb. He told the story of a diligent woman who searched her house carefully until she found a lost coin. The lessons were clear for all – that which was lost must be found!

Jesus looked upon the sinners who were eating dinner with him. He looked upon the religious leaders who were watching and he said. “I would like to tell another story. Would anyone like to hear it?”

Everyone at the table eagerly voiced their approval, and Jesus said,

“Lambs are valuable to people who raise them. Coins are valuable to families who have little money. But what is the value of a lost son?” And then he told this tale.

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"There was a man who had two sons. The older son was well-mannered, compliant, and faithful to fulfill his duties on the family farm. The younger son, however, was restless. He was always talking about adventure, exciting faraway places, and how dull life was on the family farm.

"You must not talk like that," the older brother said. "Our father has worked hard to provide this for us. One day we will have our own families, and we will need to pass it on to them."

"For what? Is this all there is to life? Working hard, toiling night and day, and then giving what we own to others while we grow old and die? There must be more to life than this! What's wrong with having a little fun."

The two brothers would often argue, and the father would hear them and pray. He feared most for his younger son, and one day his fears came true.

He was in his home in the village. His sons had left early to work on the farm on the outskirts of the village while he remained home to take care of other business. Then he heard the door open, and in walked his younger son.

"Father, I've been thinking, for years I've been thinking that I don't want to work this farm anymore. I can't stand it here anymore. I must leave. I must and go explore the world. I must find my happiness elsewhere."

The father listened and said, "Yes, son, I know. I've been listening to you and your brother argue and talk about these things for years. I wondered if you would come to this point and leave. But how will you live? How will you survive?"

"Father, I want my share of the estate. I want it now."

The father looked at his son, and his mouth dropped open. He was astonished by his son's bold request and by how shameful and unfeeling it was.

"My son, you know that custom tells us that your portion of the estate is not yours until I die."

"I know, father. I'm sorry, but I don't care anymore. I just want to get out. I must get out. I want my share of the estate."

The father was not prepared for this. He knew his younger son was restless, but he was not prepared for such a cold-hearted, demanding request. It was as if his son were saying, "Father, I wish you were dead."

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The father's heart was breaking and he said, "Alright. But these things take time. I must go to the village elders and announce that I am selling part of the estate. I will get the best price for you, and when I receive the money, I will hand it over to you."

The son looked at his father, and without saying a word, he walked out, went to his room, and began packing.

The father did not waste any time. His heart was heavy with sorrow, and when he announced to the village elders his intention to sell part of his estate, the elders were astonished. "Why? Why will you sell part of your estate? This is good land. You have worked all your life to cultivate this land. Don't you want to leave it for your children?"

And the father, now filled with shame told the elders what his younger son had said. The elders were filled with rage. "You know what the law says you should do to a son who treats his father with contempt."

"Please," the father interrupted, "I do know what the law says. I don't have to be reminded. Find me a buyer, and do it quickly. My son aims to leave as soon as he can."

It did not take long for the village elders to find someone. For years, many watched the father cultivate his land and make it the prize of the area. It was the desire of many to have it, and when part of it came up for sell, several stepped forward with offers.

When the day of the sale came, the buyer, the father, and the two sons were present. Documents were signed, monies exchanged and the father said. "On this day, I have divided my estate. The part that would have gone to my younger son upon my death I have sold for this amount of money. The part that I would have given to my older son upon my death, I now bequeath to him. He is the owner of what remains of the family farm, the boundaries have been redrawn.

The buyer had a look of triumph. Who would have thought that he would have gained such valuable property? The older son had a look of anger for the shame that his brother had brought to his father and for that part of the land that was lost forever to their family.

But the father had a look of sorrow as he said, "And now, the monies that I have gained from the sale of part of the estate, I give to my younger son."

And the younger son came forward and with a faraway look of pleasure in his eyes he said, "At last!" And he turned and walked away.

Jesus, who had been standing while he told the story, turned back to his table. He reached for his cup and took a long drink. He wanted to quench his thirst, but more importantly he wanted the behavior of the younger son to sink deeply into everyone's heart. Never had

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they heard of such shameful behavior. Those who were eating with Jesus hung their heads. They knew who they were in the story.

The religious leaders who were standing by and watching Jesus eat with the sinners held their heads high. They knew who they were in the story. It seemed that Jesus was finally telling a story the right way! It seemed that Jesus was finally getting his facts straight about who was righteous and who was unrighteous, about who should be honored and who should be cast out.

But Jesus was not finished with his story, and when we come back, we will hear the unbelievable conclusion to The Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Father.

Interlude

Jesus took a long drink from his cup, set it back on the table, and continued the story.

“When the son received his money he immediately purchased a fine horse and a beautiful garment to wear. Then, he went home, gathered his belongings and set out through the village. As he rode, villagers came out to watch the spectacle and he could hear their words, “Rebellious son!”

“Wicked son!”

“He deserves to be stoned.”

“He has shamed his family name!”

“Let him leave. We don’t want his kind around here. He is dead to us!”

But the son did not care. He laughed and rode away searching for adventure, excitement and pleasure. When he came to a big city, he found everything his heart desired. Everything that he had only imagined when he heard stories of people who travelled through his small backward village was true. The food, the people, the homes, the pleasures. They were everywhere, and the son enjoyed them for years.

But as the years passed, the world changed. Rainfall was scarce, and the yield of crops diminished until one year, there was no yield at all, and a severe famine came into that land. The price of food increased. Only a few could afford to buy. People died. And the son’s supply of money decreased until, finally, it was gone.

How quickly it all came to an end. The son thought he could live in luxury forever but now he had nothing and the owner of the fancy inn where he stayed kicked him out. Penniless the son thought, “I must find work. I have experience in farming,” but the fields were barren

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and he could not find work. And the son's reputation had spread. Everyone knew he was a Jew and that he had betrayed the traditions of his people. Now that he had no money he was despised even more.

He continued to ask for work, but no offers came. His situation became desperate. "Please, please," the son said to one man, "I must find something, or I will die."

The man laughed at the Jewish boy and said, "I know of a place where there is work. Down this road, there is a farmer. He will hire you."

"Thank you, thank you," the son said, and he walked quickly in the direction the man had pointed, but he was not prepared for the smells and the sights and the sounds of what awaited him. It was a pig farm. It was a farm where these unclean animals were raised, butchered, and sold to be eaten. The son had never touched anything like this before, but the pain in his stomach reminded him that he must find work so he went to the owner of the pig farm and said, "Please sir, I need a job." And the owner of the pig farm said, "Aren't you that Jewish boy who has been living it up in our city?" And the son said, "Sir, I need a job!" And the owner said, "OK, sleep in the barn with the animals. Your job will be to feed pigs, and this will be your wage."

The farmer held out a couple of small coins, and the son said, "That's not enough. I can't even buy food with that."

"Do you want the job or not?"

And so, the son went to the barn and began the hard and disgusting work of taking care of pigs. Day and after day he labored. Week after week he worked. With his meager income, he could not buy enough food to fill his stomach. His hunger kept him awake at night. He looked at what the pigs ate, and longed to fill his stomach with their food, but the farmer had told him if he ever caught him eating the pig food, he would immediately get rid of him.

If only his older brother could have seen him now! If only the villagers could have seen him, they would have said, "He's getting what he deserved! He's reaping what he has sown."

How true!

One night, the son began to think of home. His heart broke. He began to weep and said, "'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving!'"

The son thought on all he had done in shaming the family name and especially his father. How hard his father had worked to build up their family estate, and he had squandered his share of it.

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“He will never take me back,” the son thought. “But maybe, maybe he will hire me as a worker. Then, I can earn money to eat and to live and perhaps even try to pay back what I have wasted. Yes, I will tell him what I have done. I will say, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired men.”

“But what will the villagers do,” the son thought. Fear stabbed his heart. “They hate me. They might kill me on the spot when they see me. But, I have no choice. I will have to take that risk.”

The son stood up. He looked one more time at the pig farm, and without even bothering to tell the owner, he began his journey home.

The father was in the village that day. He had some business to attend to. His older son was on the family farm working. The father went to the city gates where important matters were discussed. His heart was heavy. For these long years he had felt the weight of what his son had done. Other villagers tried to console him.

“You must forget about him. He is dead. He is gone. He has shamed you. He has shamed us. He is lost forever.”

But they did not understand. This father still loved his son. Yes, his son had shamed him. Yes, he had taken his wealth, but he still loved him, and every day he would look down the road where his son had ridden away so many years before.

On this day, as the father looked, he saw someone coming. He was still a long way off, but someone was walking on the road toward the village. Many people walked to the village, and the father hardly noticed, but on this day, something kept him looking. The elders were calling him back to the business matter at hand, but the father said, “Wait. Just wait. Look. That walk looks familiar. I know that walk.” And as the person came closer the father said, “I recognize those features! It is my son! My son is returning!”

The village elders stood up and with frowns on their faces and anger in their voices they said, “Yes, it is your son. Shall we ...” But they could not finish their sentence for the father did something as unexpected as the son returning to the father. The father started running toward his son! Men don’t run! They walk with dignity, but this father only cared for his son and that his son was returning.

The father’s servants who had been with him that day looked at the village elders and said, “We must follow our master,” and away they ran after their master. The village elders looked at each other and said, “We must find out,” and they ran too for they did not want to miss what would happen next!

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When the son saw his father running to him, he was not sure what to do. He did not expect this. “My son, my son!” the father cried. And then his father stood before him and embraced him with weeping and kisses! The son wasn’t ready for such an outburst of compassion, and all he could do was fall back upon his rehearsed confession that he had worked out in that distant land where he lived with pigs.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please hire me on ...

But the son could not complete his confession. He was about to get to the part about being hired as a farmhand when his father cut him off and said to his servants.

“Quickly! Go to my house and find the finest robe that I own and put it on him. You, go get the family ring and put it on his finger. You, go get sandals for his tired, bruised feet. The rest of you, fetch the fattest calf you can find and kill it. Tonight, we will have a feast. The entire village is invited. We will celebrate! This son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’

The village elders were watching, and when they saw such a display of compassion and joy, they began to celebrate as the father continued to embrace his son and weep.

Jesus paused. He looked at the religious leaders who were stunned at the turn of events in the story. He looked at the people eating with him who were overjoyed. And then he returned to the table and began serving his guests who were eating with him while the religious leaders looked on with a frown.

The prodigal son and his prodigal father! Some of you heard the title of this tale and thought, “What do you mean *and his prodigal father*? The prodigal in the story is the son!”

Our confusion comes from misunderstanding the word *prodigal*. *Prodigal* does not mean wicked or sinful. *Prodigal* means excessive and abundant. The son was prodigal because he was excessive in his selfishness and wild living. The father was prodigal in his forgiveness and compassion! He was *The Prodigal Father!* And we would not be wrong in saying that the father was more prodigal in his compassion than the son was in his sinfulness.

In an incredible act of love, the father allowed his son to take away his share of the family inheritance. What took a lifetime to accumulate was sold in a matter of days. The private event was village news, and the father did not act but remained quiet and endured the shame and humiliation of his son’s behavior.

In an incredible act of love, the father ran to his returning son. Men, in such cultures did not run in public because it was beneath their dignity. Their stately walk displayed their honor. But the father ran to the son in full view of the villagers. This caught the son by surprise –

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and it solved a nagging problem. How would he return through the village? His shameful behavior was public knowledge from the beginning when he received and sold his share of the estate. The villagers upon seeing his return would spit insult upon him as he walked from the edge of the village to his father's home.

The son surely had steeled himself against this certain response. But the son did not have to endure the pain of disgrace because the father took the shame for him! The father, in compassion and joy, threw off all public dignity and ran wildly toward his boy who had come home, and arm in arm they walked back into the village toward their home.

A feast was proclaimed for the entire village! The biggest, fattest calf would be slain and prepared for all to eat for the lost son had been found. The dead son was alive again!

What kind of father was this? No, that is the wrong question. What kind of God is Jesus talking about? He is the Prodigal God – excessive in His compassion, forgiveness, and welcoming gifts to us. Don't you want to love this God? Don't you want to get your life right with Him? Don't you want to give your heart to Him? The God of Jesus is *The Prodigal Father* – the God of extreme compassion.

Jesus brought this love to those who needed it most – sinners! And that is why they loved Him. Jesus brings such love to you. How will you respond to him?